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# The **P**ALIMPSEST

DECEMBER 1925

## CONTENTS

**At the End of Their Rope 405**

CHARLES H. BABBITT

**Grant's Des Moines Speech 409**

J. A. SWISHER

**Comment 422**

THE EDITOR

**Index 425**

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## THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

*Superintendent*

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## THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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## At the End of Their Rope

A part of the public park system of the city of Council Bluffs embraces the remainder of what in early days was called "Big Lake", a body of water which, in 1853, was in the neighborhood of a mile and one-half long and from one-half to three-fourths of a mile wide. It was in fact the old bed of the Missouri River abandoned by the stream about the year 1832, when what was known to river men as "Hart's Cutoff" was formed nearly a mile to the westward. Between the new channel and the abandoned river bed was left a strip of land locally known as "the island", covered by a dense growth of cottonwood, willow, and other trees, underbrush, and wild grape vines, making an ideal habitat for wild turkeys, rabbits, and quail. A few bobcats and lynxes also dwelt therein, while coons, skunks, wolves, foxes, and other animals common to the locality abounded, making the tract a favorite hunt-



ing ground for the nimrods of the then small city and vicinity.

One Saturday morning, after a moderate snow fall late in the autumn of 1860, two well-grown school boys left the City Hotel to spend a holiday hunting on the island and in the vicinity of the lake. Late in the afternoon, having traversed the island and rounded the northern end of the lake, they began their homeward journey, hunting through the rough hills bordering the eastern side of the lake, and near the close of the day entered a broad ravine thickly wooded with small burr oak and other trees. About half way through this ravine, and only little more than a mile from home, they came upon a number of horses tethered to the branches of the trees, the indications being that they had been there for several days and had been well cared for. Boys to the manner born, they instantly recognized the fact that they had come upon a horse thief's hiding place. They were sufficiently discreet to know that, although no human being was to be seen, it would be well not to seem too curious, so apparently without paying great attention to the horses, they hastened to the hotel and informed the landlord of their discovery. He immediately communicated the information to the city marshal, who was also a deputy sheriff.

It was too late to do anything about the matter that night, but the marshal summoned a posse of three citizens good and true and made preparation



for a very early move the following morning. Accordingly at break of day the deputy and his posse, with one of the boys for a guide, started for the thieves' rendezvous. Upon arrival there they found that the quarry had fled during the night with all the booty. The trail led out to the lake and along its eastern and southern shore to the south end of the island where it entered the shallow water lying between the river bank and a sand bar some three hundred yards distant, thence across the bar and into the rapid channel. Through the deep water the thieves had evidently swum the horses to the Nebraska shore. This dangerous course was adopted by them to avoid the town of Omaha on the south and Florence at the north.

From this point the boy guide returned to his home, while the deputy and posse went down to the ferry between Omaha and Council Bluffs, crossed the river, and soon afterward picked up the trail of the thieves which led westward over the first line of hills and then turned to the north. Obviously the scoundrels were heading for the Indian country near Blackbird Hills at which place the Omaha Indian agency was then located. After passing far enough north to avoid the town of Florence the trail returned to the river bank just above the village of Fort Calhoun, and about two miles farther on it terminated. The thieves had gone into camp, prepared and eaten breakfast, rolled up in their blankets, and gone to sleep. It was in this condition that



they were discovered by the deputy and his posse. They were awakened and disarmed, and with the recovered horses the deputy and posse soon afterward began the return journey to Council Bluffs, where they arrived early in the evening.

While the horses were being put away at the livery stable some one asked the deputy if he had brought in the thieves. He replied laconically, "No, we didn't bring 'em in, but we know where they are."

A few days later a hunter arriving at the village of Fort Calhoun reported having seen the bodies of three men hanging in a tree a mile or two above town. Investigation proved his report to be true. The coroner attended to the obsequies without inquiring too closely as to why, when, or by whom the men had been hanged, and thus the episode, not an unusual one for the time, was closed.

The stolen horses were all eventually restored to their owners, who were residents of southern Iowa and northern Missouri. And the boy who helped trail the thieves never forgot that thrilling experience.

CHARLES H. BABBITT



## Grant's Des Moines Speech

Even an old soldier in the city of Des Moines on Wednesday, September 29, 1875, would have been deeply impressed with the profusion of floral decorations and the universal display of patriotic colors. Spanning Fourth Street from the Aborn House to the Allen Block was a triumphal arch, on one side of which in mammoth letters were the words "Welcome to Des Moines", while on the other side, as a fitting thought for the departing guest, was the stirring sentiment, "The Union Forever". The visitor who made his way through the jostling crowd along Fourth Street to the Savery House, where two of the largest flags ever brought to Des Moines were floating in the autumnal breeze, would have noticed another arch inscribed with the legends, "Army of the Tennessee" and "Let us have Peace". Patriotic selections played by two military bands thrilled the crowds of Civil War veterans who thronged the streets.

The occasion for this display of patriotism in the capital city of Iowa was the annual reunion of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee. Conspicuous among the members of the organization were some of the most able military leaders in the world. President Ulysses S. Grant, the most illustrious American soldier of the century, whose name and



fame were cherished with those of Washington and Lincoln, honored the reunion with his quiet and unostentatious presence. General William T. Sherman, loved by every boy in blue and admired the world over for his military genius, was president of the Society. The Secretary of War, W. W. Belknap, one of the most eminent commanders of Iowa troops, was also in attendance.

The President and his party arrived on the Des Moines Valley Railroad about half past three in the morning of September 29th, and remained in their special cars until seven. Between six and seven a special salute of twenty-one guns was fired for the President, and two salutes of thirteen guns each for Secretary Belknap and General Sherman. The formal program of the reunion began with a business session of the Society at eleven o'clock in the Opera House.

In the evening there was music by the St. Louis Arsenal Band and Drum Corps, a number of addresses, and an elaborate banquet at the Savery which was reported to have been unquestionably "the finest feast ever spread in Iowa." The address of welcome by Judge C. C. Cole was greeted with hearty applause. Then General Sherman introduced Thomas C. Fletcher, formerly the Governor of Missouri, as orator of the occasion. He spoke at some length concerning Iowa in the Civil War and paid a high tribute to the service of the private soldier. At the close of his address there were loud cries for



Grant, nor would his erstwhile comrades in arms be quiet until the President came to the footlights and spoke ingenuously of the war, of problems confronting the nation, and of his own ideals.

“Comrades: — It always affords me much gratification to meet my old comrades in arms of ten to fourteen years ago, and to live over again the trials and hardships of those days, hardships imposed for the preservation and perpetuation of our free institutions. We believed then, and believe now, that we had a government worth fighting for, and if need be, dying for. How many of our comrades of those days paid the latter price for our preserved Union! Let their heroism and sacrifices be ever green in our memory. Let not the results of their sacrifices be destroyed. The Union and the free institutions for which they fell should be held more dear for these sacrifices.

“We will not deny to any of those who fought against us any privileges under the government which we claim for ourselves. On the contrary we welcome all such of them who come forward in good faith to help build up the waste places and perpetuate our institutions against all enemies as brothers in full interest with us in a common heritage. But we are not prepared to apologize for the part we took in the great struggle. It is to be hoped that like trials will never befall our country. In this sentiment no class of people can more heartily join than the soldier who submitted to the dangers, trials



and hardships of the camp and the battle-field, on which ever side he may have fought. No class of people are more interested in guarding against a recurrence of those days. Let us then begin by guarding against every enemy threatening the perpetuity of free republican institutions.

“I do not bring into this assemblage politics, certainly not partizan politics, but it is a fair subject for the deliberation of soldiers to consider what may be necessary to secure the prize for which they battled. In a republic like ours, where the citizen is the sovereign and the official the servant, where no power is exercised except by the will of the people, it is important that the sovereign — the people — should possess intelligence. The free school is the promoter of that intelligence which is to preserve us as one Nation. If we are to have another contest in the near future of our national existence I predict that the dividing line will not be Mason and Dixon’s, but between patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition, ambition and ignorance on the other. Now in this centennial year of our national existence, I believe it a good time to begin the work of strengthening the foundation of the house commenced by our patriotic forefathers one hundred years ago at Concord and Lexington. Let us all labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of Free Thought, Free Speech, a Free Press, Pure Morals, unfettered Religious Sentiment, and of Equal Rights and Privileges to all



men irrespective of Nationality, Color or Religion. Encourage free schools and resolve that not one dollar of money appropriated to their support, no matter how raised, shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school. Resolve that either the state or Nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets. Leave the matter of religion to the family circle, the church and the private school supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the church and state forever separate. With these safeguards I believe the battles which created us 'the Army of the Tennessee' will not have been fought in vain."

President Grant has always been known as a man of action and few words. His Des Moines address, brief though it was, represented an unusual oratorical effort, if indeed it was not the best speech of his entire public career. Although the speech itself was remarkable, its subsequent history was even more surprising.

While it might be assumed that any public address by the President would receive widespread attention, Grant's Des Moines speech would scarcely be considered sensational. Nevertheless, as reported and commented upon in the newspapers, it stirred up a tempestuous controversy. Since an exact copy of the speech as delivered was not available, the



early reports were neither uniform nor accurate, while the editorials based upon flagrant misquotation were at cross-purposes. One of the New York papers said that the speech was "so bungling in its construction that it must have been Grant's own," and that "it would never have been made if he had not escaped from his keepers and from all good political advisers."

The Philadelphia *Times* praised the address for its literary construction but condemned it as a third-term campaign speech. "President Grant has broken his silence," wrote the editor, "made a platform of his own, and flung his third-term banner to the breeze in defiance of all party organizations. Just who is the author of his remarkable speech delivered before the Army of the Tennessee, in which he defines his new political campaign, is of little consequence. It has been elaborately prepared, and has the merit of polished culture and studied expression, such as the politician would employ. It is, in fact, a distinct political departure, making the bid of desperation for a continuance of power." Democratic papers in Boston agreed with this view and thought the speech had been "deliberately and craftily planned".

The New York *Tribune* commented upon the fact that President Grant broke his usual custom and read a speech of some length in answer to a call from the audience. The only feature of the address to which any political significance could attach, the



writer thought, was the pointed reference to the subject of common schools and the necessity of keeping church and state forever separate. The *Tribune* concurred in the opinion of the President, but thought it a "mystery" that he should have introduced the subject in so formal a manner and upon such an occasion. The editor asserted that education was not a political issue, while the subjects of finance, currency, and administrative reform were vital questions, "and an earnest word or two on these, particularly on the currency" would have been much more appropriate. "As it is, men can only wonder why he passed over the questions on which the parties have joined battle, and in which everybody feels a vital interest", to talk upon one which was not a national political issue. In conclusion the speech was characterized as only "a contribution to the curiosities of official literature".

Amid this confusion of editorial comment, the *Iowa State Register* explained that the speech had been written hurriedly just before supper on the evening when it was delivered. During the afternoon while riding about the city a man in the President's carriage had mentioned the functions of the public schools in the course of the conversation immediately after the problem of reconstruction had been discussed. The President spoke freely on both subjects, whereupon his companion expressed the wish that he would sometime soon make his views public. Grant replied that if he had time he



would prepare a few remarks upon those two questions, as he would probably be called upon to speak at the reunion meeting in the evening. The ride was shortened for that purpose, and the President hastily jotted down the short speech.

Viewed in this light the subject-matter of the address became perfectly explicable: it was but the logical development of thoughts which were uppermost in the President's mind. The occasion was not suitable for a political address. Nor did the President wish to surrender dignity and courtesy for the sake of political preferment. The trials and hardships of war were still vivid in the memory of the veterans, yet they were eager to hear of the pursuits of peace. Far from being illogical or inopportune, the speech was the result of a happy combination of circumstances. In all sincerity President Grant discussed education as a factor in the preservation of peace and free government. The speech was entirely logical and the exigencies of the occasion sufficiently explain its origin.

The main controversy over the address centered not upon its source, however, but upon the content. The principal theme of the speech was a plea for the preservation of republican government through the encouragement and development of free public schools. To this end the President advocated liberal use of money for education both by the States and the nation, but opposed the use of such funds for the support of sectarian schools. His thought was ex-



pressed in the words: "Resolve that either the state or Nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets."

As published in the *Iowa State Register*, this sentence was misquoted by the insertion of three words and two additional letters so that it read: "Resolve that *neither* the State or Nation, *nor* both combined, shall support institutions of learning *other than those* sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets."

Thus the President was reported to have said the opposite of what he actually thought, making it appear that he favored State maintenance of common schools only and was directly opposed to public support of higher education especially in sectarian colleges. In this form the speech was copied by metropolitan papers throughout the country and discussed in Europe. Professor L. F. Parker of the State University of Iowa declared that the erroneous statement rang "through the civilized world like the thunders of Jove, evoked repeated comments of the ablest pens, agitated the minds of the most sagacious statesmen and disturbed the thought of crowned and mitred heads."

Some newspapers, like the *Vinton Eagle*, con-



tained a correct copy of the address, but other journals that did not have their own reporters in Des Moines relied upon the *Iowa State Register* for the complete text. In that way the false version obtained currency. The published proceedings of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee contained an exact copy of the President's speech, printed from the manuscript, but that was not available at the time of the controversy.

In 1875 there was a noticeable wave of opposition to higher education at public expense. Much to the embarrassment of President George Thacher and others interested in the welfare of the State University of Iowa, President Grant's speech seemed to be in direct opposition to additional appropriations by the State legislature. Educators who were interested in private or denominational schools, however, were elated over the apparent "turning of the tide" against State colleges. President George F. Magoun of Iowa College, in an article published within a month after the Des Moines speech, hastened to take advantage of the President's alleged position in favor of unloading from public education "the upper tiers of institutions which have been piled upon it of late years" in order to "save common schools from Catholic assaults."

Meanwhile Professor Parker, who had become interested in the educational dispute, believed that the excerpts from the President's speech did not correctly represent his views — that something had



been added which the President did not intend. Accordingly he analyzed the speech, pointing out the inconsistencies of the address as published and calling attention to the fact that the sentence which was being so widely commented upon was not in accord with the rest of the address. In a paper read before the Iowa State Teachers' Association in December, 1875, he asserted that, "Only a single sentence in all the speech can by *any possibility* be tortured into opposition to all education by the State, except that in common schools, and that one is sandwiched into an argument against sectarian education, and made a part of it. It was this sectarian education, and this only, as we believe, at which he aimed all his blows." Moreover, Professor Parker argued that irrespective of the speech being hastily fashioned in Des Moines or the probability that words were inserted which altered the meaning of the speaker, still the speech as a whole did not sustain the extreme and positive declarations against State support of higher education which were attributed to it.

The presentation of these facts by Professor Parker convinced those most interested in public education that the President had been misrepresented or that he misrepresented himself — a point which President Grant alone could settle. Accordingly, Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood sent the Magon article to the President, in which he was made to appear hostile to "the upper tiers of institutions" supported by the State, and asked him to repeat



what he had said or what he designed to express.

In response to this request the President replied: "What I said at Des Moines was hastily noted down in pencil and may have expressed my views imperfectly. I have not the manuscript before me as I gave it to the Secretary of the society. My idea of what I said is this: 'Resolve that the State or Nation or both combined shall furnish to every child growing up in the land, the means of acquiring a good common school education.' Such is my idea and such I intended to have said. I feel no hostility to free education going as high as the State or National Government feels able to provide — protecting, however, every child in the privilege of a common school education before public means are appropriated to a higher education for the few."

Such an explicit statement of intention, of memory, and of opinion gave complete satisfaction to every one in favor of public schools, while the more reluctant were forced to believe that an error had been made in the first printed copies of the speech. As conclusive evidence a photograph of Grant's manuscript was obtained. A second photograph, taken by T. W. Townsend of Iowa City, was vouched for by the President himself as "the photo of the original Des Moines speech."

The chain of evidence was complete. The perverted sentence which had made President Grant appear to attack the cause of higher education, the sentence which had "evoked repeated comments of



the ablest pens", and which had "agitated the minds of the most sagacious statesmen" was at length made clear. Nevertheless, the misquotation persisted and found its way into some of the biographies of the soldier President. Grant's Des Moines speech is famous for what he did not say.

J. A. SWISHER



## Comment by the Editor

### A MAN OF CHARACTER

U. S. Grant is one of the enigmas of American history: his career is stranger than Lincoln's. A failure at middle life in the eyes of the world — even in his own world of unkempt Western towns — he suddenly flashed across the zenith of public attention, the greatest general of his time. Silent, unostentatious, innocent of artifice, and undisturbed by ambitious dreams, he accepted opportunity as a duty with calm assurance of his own mastery. General Sherman said that he was "as brave, patriotic, and just as the great prototype Washington, as unselfish, kind-hearted, and honest as a man should be"; but his chief characteristic, thought Sherman, was his "simple faith in success". Yet the very qualities which contributed to his greatness — confidence in himself, straightforwardness, magnanimity, and trust in the honor of men — likewise led to the tragedies of his life.

Character was Grant's endowment. Combined with absolute personal integrity was an inveterate guilelessness that repeated betrayal of trust failed to cure. It was said of him that he believed everybody to be as honest as himself. As a boy of eight he wanted a colt owned by a neighbor who asked



twenty-five dollars for it. His father thought the horse was worth only twenty dollars and sent the boy to offer that price. "If it was not accepted," wrote Grant in his memoirs, "I was to offer twenty-two and a half, and if that would not get him, to give the twenty-five. I at once mounted a horse and went for the colt. When I got to Mr. Ralston's house, I said to him: Papa says I may offer you twenty dollars for the colt, but if you won't take that, I am to offer twenty-two and a half, and if you won't take that, to give you twenty-five." The incident was an omen. Change the figure of farmer Ralston profiting by the boy's artlessness to O. E. Babcock of the whisky ring, to Jay Gould of Black Friday fame, or to Ferdinand Ward, the final profiteer from Grant's credulity, and the horse story becomes prophetic.

Aside from his magnanimous honesty, no feature of Grant's character is more prominent than his reticence. He never made a speech if he could avoid it. When he took command of the Twenty-first Illinois Infantry he was introduced to the regiment by two very eloquent orators. The only response of the new colonel was the laconic order, "Men, go to your quarters." Later in the war, a committee from Congress came to Vicksburg to present a gold medal to the victorious leader of the armies of the West. When the last speaker had concluded his peroration there was an expectant pause. All were waiting for Grant to speak, but he remained silent. The situation became so tense that young Jesse



Grant could not bear it. "Papa, aren't you going to make a speech too?" he cried. "No, my dear boy!" answered his father with such vehemence that every one heard, and a wave of laughter ended the general embarrassment.

When occasion demanded Grant spoke concisely and with the utmost frankness. Neither of his inaugural addresses contained more than fourteen hundred words, while his Des Moines speech of approximately seven hundred words was one of the most extended impromptu addresses he ever made. But if his remarks were brief they had a ring of candor and sincerity. The terse sentences of his first inaugural are almost axiomatic. "I shall on all subjects have a policy to recommend, but none to enforce against the will of the people. Laws are to govern all alike — those opposed as well as those who favor them. I know no method to secure the repeal of bad or obnoxious laws so effective as their stringent execution." Despite the clamor of contemporary detractors, his speeches will be searched in vain for subtle dissimulation. He stated his ideas so simply and withal so fearlessly that people unaccustomed to truthfulness in politics mistook his veracity for shrewd design. His Des Moines speech in behalf of public schools was hailed as a clever bid for a third term as President! He was as incapable of hypocrisy as of treason.

J. E. B.



## INDEX

[NOTE — The names of contributors of articles in THE PALIMPSEST are printed in SMALL CAPITALS. The titles of articles and of all other publications are printed in *italics*.]

- Aborn House (Des Moines), 409  
 Adams, John Quincy, retirement of, from office, 267  
 Adel, trip to, 240  
 Advertising, telegraph used in, 389, 390  
 Agar, Adam, accident of, 47, 48; rescue of, 51, 52  
 Agricultural Building (World's Fair), description of, 154, 155  
 Aguinaldo, Emilio, 203  
 Akers, J. W., work of, in exhibit, 88  
 Alcatraz Island, 196, 220  
 Aldrich, Nelson W., career of, 266  
 Aldrich, Thomas Bailey, 282  
 Alers, Mr., home of, 227  
 Alexander, W. B., presence of, at council, 307  
 Alexandria (Missouri), telegraph at, 376, 377, 380  
 Alger, R. A., ballots for, 289, 291  
 Algonkian Indians, language of, 165, 166  
 Algonquin Indians, mention of, 121  
 Alleghany Mountains, telegraph across, 376  
 Allegheny College, student of, 269  
 Allen Block (Des Moines), 409  
 Allison, Mr., visit to, 231  
 Allison, John, sketch of life of, 267, 268; politics of, 270  
 Allison, William Boyd, sketch of life of, 265-302; cut of, facing 265; death of, 265, 266, 301; father of, 267, 268, 270; birth of, 268; admission of, to bar, 269; candidacy of, 281; description of, 282; work of, 282; comment of, 282, 283; failure of, to secure nomination, 284; ballots for, 289, 290, 291, 292, 294, 298, 299; senatorial campaign of, 296-302  
 Allison badges, sale of, 286  
 Allison brigade, organization of, 285  
 Allison Club, parade of, 287  
 Allison-Cummins contest, 299-301  
 Alton (Illinois), telegraph at, 376, 377  
 American Fur Company, trade of, 24, 25, 27, 41, 44; trading post of, 106; mention of, 128; canoe of, 309  
 Ames, Fisher, essay of, 75, 76  
 Ames, lady battalion from, 161, 162  
 Anamosa, trip to, 232, 250, 251; railroad to, 250; population of, 253; newspapers in, 258; prediction concerning, 258  
 Anderson, William I., interest of, in eclipse, 64  
 Andrew, schools in, 256, 257; conditions in, 260  
 Angel Island, passing of, 220  
 Anti-Horse Thief Association, 362  
 Anti-Nebraska Republican Convention, delegate to, 271  
 Apalit (Philippine Islands), 217  
 Appropriations, Committee on, chairman of, 280  
 Aricara Indians, trade with, 9; villages of, 9, 169  
 Arizona (transport), part of, in expedition, 202  
 Arkansas, campaigns in, 397  
 Arms, *The Call to*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 177-181  
 Arthur, Chester Alan, veto of, 281  
 Ash, Commodore, interest of, in eclipse, 59  
 Ashland County (Ohio), 268, 269  
 Astor, John Jacob, expeditions of, 8, 9; policy of, 21-27; trade of, 44  
 Atalissa, trip to, 232  
 Auburn, mills at, 230  
 Ayouwais, trade with, 17  
 BABBITT, CHARLES H., *At the End of Their Rope*, 405-408  
 BABBITT, CHARLES H., *The Old Potawattamie Mill*, 319-334  
 Babcock, O. E., 423  
 Badges, Iowa, giving of, at exposition, 94  
 Bagbag River, bluffs along, 212; crossing of, 217  
 Baily's Beads, photograph of, 71, 72  
 Baker, W. J., interest of, in eclipse, 71



- Baldwin, John N., Allison nominated by, 294  
 Baltimore (Maryland), telegraph at, 375, 376  
*Baltimore* (cruiser), part of, in expedition, 202  
 Band, Iowa State, service of, at World's Fair, 158, 159, 160, 161  
 Banking systems, commission to study, 281  
 Barborka, Joseph, tower clock of, 91  
 Battery G (Sixth Artillery), expedition of, 201, 202  
 Baxter, Richard, 361  
 Bear, abundance of, 35  
 Beard, William, and Son, exhibit of, 89  
 Beardsley, Charles, work of, 286  
 Beardstown (Illinois), telegraph at, 376, 377  
 Beauharnois, Governor, command of, 120  
 Beaver, abundance of, 35  
 Bedford, troops from, 181, 186  
 Belknap, W. W., presence of, at reunion at Des Moines, 410  
 Bell, James F., command of, 211  
 Bellefont (Pennsylvania), John Allison at, 267  
 Bellefontaine Cemetery (St. Louis), Manuel Lisa buried in, 13  
 Belle View (Nebraska), mention of, 243 (see also Bellevue)  
 Bellevue, population of, 253; horse thieves in, 360  
 Bellevue (Nebraska), *Omaha* at, 135; Indians at, 321  
 Bellevue gang, fame of, 360, 361  
*Bennington* (gunboat), greeting from, 198  
 Bentley, C. S., part of, in exposition, 92  
 Benton County, thieves in, 360; protective association in, 362; judge of, 364  
 Berkeley (California), university at, 194  
 Berryville (Virginia), troops near, 396  
 Berryville Pike, troops on, 396, 397, 399, 400, 401  
 Biddle, Thomas, presence of, at council, 307; trip of, 309-311  
 Big Blue River, land near, 358  
 Big Horn River, expedition along, 3; fort on, 5  
 Big Knife River, village on, 5  
 Big Lake, description of, 405  
 Big Rock, location of, 363  
 Big Sioux River, valley of, 135; mention of, 317  
 "Big Woods", location of, 361  
 Bigfoot (Indian Chief), 321; history of, 322; objections of, 327  
 Birch, Mr., 361  
 Black Hawk (Indian Chief), enmity of, 18; portrait of, 151  
 Black Hawk War, results of, 28; cause of, 41  
 Blackbird Hills (Nebraska), *Omaha* at, 132; Indian agency at, 407  
 Blackfeet Indians, trouble with, 6, 9  
 Blaine, James G., rival of, 265; service of, 266; promise of, 276  
 Blickensderfer, J., interest of, in eclipse, 64  
 Blockhouse, erection of, 320  
 Blondeau, Maurice, trade of, 26, 27; camp of, 309  
 Bloomington, newspaper published at, 373; telegraph at, 373, 374, 376, 377, 381, 386, 389; telegraph operator at, 387, 388; telegraph rate to, 391, 392  
 Bloomington *Democratic Enquirer*, editorials in, 373, 374; telegraph utilized by, 375; comment in, 380  
 Bloomington *Herald*, comment in, 385  
 "Blue and Gray Patrol, The", playing of, 198  
 Blue Grass, telegraph at, 392  
 Blue Ridge Mountains, 394  
 Boies, Horace, presence of, at World's Fair, 159, 161, 162  
 Boilvin, Nicholas, trade of, 20; presence of, at council, 307  
 Bonaparte, displays from, 91  
 Boone, train to, 47; mention of, 55, 356; location of, 352; specialist at, 355  
 Boone County, legislators from, 53, 54  
 Boone River, city on, 228  
 Borduwine, Fred, wounding of, 208  
 Boston (Massachusetts), traveller from, 236; custom house at, 278; comment in paper of, 414  
 Boyle, Hugh, mill of, 110, 116  
 Brackett, G. B., work of, at exposition, 90  
 Brandon, Charles, case of, 368, 369  
 Brazelton House (Mount Pleasant), observatory at, 64  
 Breakfast, description of, 237, 238, 242  
 BRIGGS, JOHN ELY, comment by, 42-44, 73-76, 105-108, 137-139, 174-176, 223, 224, 262-264, 303, 304, 335, 336, 371, 372, 403, 404, 422-424  
 BRIGGS, JOHN ELY, *In the Battle of Winchester*, 394-402  
 BRIGGS, JOHN ELY, *When Iowa Was Young*, 117-127



- British, influence of, on Indians, 10;  
interest of, in America, 14, 15;  
trading of, 30-41
- Brodys gang, fame of, 360
- Brooklyn, description of, 237, 238
- Brown, Charles, arrest of, 99; part  
of, in trial, 100
- Brown, W. W., gang of horse thieves  
led by, 360
- Browne, J. C., interest of, in eclipse,  
71
- Brown's ferry, 338
- Brownsville (Missouri), *Omaha* at,  
131
- Brussels (Belgium), international  
conference at, 279
- Buena Vista ferry, location of, 376
- Buffalo, abundance of, 35
- Bunker's Hill (Virginia), troops at,  
396
- Burgwin, John H. K., fort construct-  
ed by, 328
- Burke, Mrs. E. A., part of, at exposi-  
tion, 93
- Burke, Edmund, 275, 283
- Burlington, trade at, 19; eclipse at,  
59-63, 65, 71; cut of observatory  
at, facing 68; accident near, 80;  
commission at, 82; displays from,  
91; travel to, 110; mention of,  
150; immigrants in, 262, 263;  
newspapers published at, 373, 374;  
telegraph at, 374, 376, 377, 385,  
387, 393; telegraph rate to, 391
- Burlington and agency road, travel  
over, 110, 115, 116
- Burlington, Cedar Rapids and North-  
ern Railway, accident on, 80, 81
- Burlington *Gazette*, message to, 374;  
mention of, 393
- Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, comments in,  
374, 380, 381
- Burlington *Iowa State Gazette*, com-  
ment in, 393
- Burrington, trip to, 231; founder of,  
260
- Butler, General Ben, home of, 82, 83
- Byers, Melvin H., order of, 178, 179
- Caballeros (Philippine Islands), 208
- Cabin, description of, 339, 354
- Cahokia (Illinois), French in, 117
- Caldwell, Billy, village of, 321, 329,  
330; contract of, 323, 327; death  
of, 326 (see also Sagaunash)
- Calhoun, John C., mention of, 26
- California, Philip Clark in, 95, 96;  
gold rush to, 108; immigration to,  
128; trip to, 188, 189; votes from,  
291
- California, University of, football  
game with, 194
- California artillery, commander of,  
205
- Caloocan (Philippine Islands), 208,  
217
- Calulut (Philippine Islands), fight-  
ing near, 216
- Calumet River, fork of, 317; boun-  
dary at, 318
- Calumets, description of, 311; com-  
ment on, 335, 336
- Calumpit (Philippine Islands), 209,  
211, 212, 213, 217
- Calves, price of, 357
- Calvin, Samuel, work of, in exposi-  
tion, 90
- Camp Cuba Libre (Florida), troops  
at, 184
- Camp McKinley, At*, by BRUCE E.  
MAHAN, 182-186
- Camp Merriam (California), troops  
removed to, 191
- Camp Merritt (California), arrival of  
troops at, 189, 190; description of,  
189, 190, 191
- Campaign, presidential (1860), story  
of, 109-116
- Campbell, Thomas, reference to, 255
- Canada, fur company in, 17; trip to,  
233
- Canoes, description of, 30, 31
- Capitol, site of, 228
- Carriage Annex (New Orleans Fair),  
86, 91
- Cascade, trip to, 232; schools in, 256
- Cass, Lewis, speech of, 305, 306,  
316; presence of, at council, 308;  
arrival of, 310; departure of, 318;  
wager on, 386
- Castana, flour at, 340
- Cattle, price of, 358
- Cavite (Philippine Islands), passing  
of, 201; troops at, 204; Admiral  
Dewey at, 205; location of, 206;  
guard at, 206, 208; smallpox in,  
208; mention of, 218, 219
- Cecil, Sackville A., interest of, in  
eclipse, 59
- Cedar County, thieves' station in,  
361; vigilantes in, 363, 366; resi-  
dent of, 369
- Cedar Creek, troops near, 402
- Cedar Falls, eclipse at, 59, 64, 67;  
displays from, 91; trip to, 250;  
prediction concerning, 258
- Cedar Falls and Minnesota Railroad,  
junction of, 259
- Cedar Falls Canning Company, dis-  
play of, 80
- Cedar Falls Pump Company, display  
of, 80, 81
- Cedar Rapids, meeting at, 78; exhib-  
its from, 79, 80, 81, 91; mention



- of, 150; trip to, 250; trip from, 251; population of, 252, 253; description of, 253; schools in, 255; prediction concerning, 258
- Cedar River, valley of, 264; crossing of, 338; vigilance committees near, 363
- Centennial Exposition (Philadelphia), 77, 89, 146
- Central America, display from, 90; markets of, 146
- Cerro Gordo County Teachers' Institute, meetings of, 257
- Ceylon, plat of, at World's Fair, 148
- Chambersburg (Pennsylvania), burning of, 395
- Champion's Hill, fighting at, 397
- Charles, Mary, marriage of, 12
- Charles, Polly, marriage of, 12
- Charles City, name of, 254
- Chase, F. N., exhibit in charge of, 88; service of, as secretary at fair, 148
- Chase, Salmon P., candidacy of, 271, 272
- Chato River (see Platte River)
- Cheadle's Grove, purchases at, 341
- Cherokee, eclipse at, 64; railroad at, 344
- Cherokee County, journey to, 337; provisions secured at, 340; settlers in, 343
- Chestnut Street (Jefferson), observatory on, 63
- Cheyenne (Wyoming), troops at, 188
- Chicago (Illinois), World's Fair at, 146-163; trip to, 226; description of, 226, 233, 234; convention at, 285; Iowa headquarters at, 286; line of march in, 287; treaty made at, 320; telegraph at, 376, 378, 392, 393
- Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, troops conducted over, 180, 181, 185, 187
- Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad, road of, 251
- Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad, troops conducted over, 185, 186, 187
- Chicago and North Western Railroad, accident on, 45-48; troops conducted over, 185, 186, 187
- Chicago River, description of, 234
- Chicago *Tribune*, Shelley family aided by, 53
- Chickamauga Park (Tennessee), camp at, 184
- Chippewa Indians, chief of, 305, 315, 316; council with, 305, 306; feud with, 307; delegation of, 307; arrival of, 310; greeting of, 311; war with, 313; lands of, 320
- Choate, Joseph H., boast of, 268
- Christianity, symbol of, 335
- Christmas, celebration of, 201
- Chrysanthemum Exposition, World's, Iowa band at, 158, 159
- Church, place of, 413, 415
- Churches, number of, in West Union, 253, 254
- Churchville (see Alexandria, Missouri)
- Cincinnati (Ohio), trip to, 232
- City Hotel (Council Bluffs), 406
- Civil War, story of, 141-145; first bloodshed of, 177, 178; veterans of, 179, 409-413; numbering of regiments of, 183; mention of, 226; close of, 346, 351; Iowa troops in, 410
- Clark, Governor, appointment by, 10
- Clark, Alexander, work of, at exhibit, 92
- Clark, Philip, going of, to California, 95; return of, 96, 97; arrest of, 99; trial of, 100; property of, 102, 104; life of, 105-108
- Clark, Mrs. Philip, land bought by, 95; divorce of, 96
- Clark, Rufus L. B., address by, 115
- Clark, William, part of, in fur trade, 4; speech of, 305, 306, 313, 314, 315, 317; presence of, at council, 307, 308; estimate of, 308; trip of, 309-311; departure of, 318
- Clarke, William Penn, part of, in Wilkinson case, 97-102
- Clarkson, J. S., work of, 286, 290
- Clarksville, boat at, 309
- Clay, Henry, vote for, 270
- Clayton County, land in, 16, 230; school in, 256
- Clermont, description of, 230
- Cleveland (Ohio), telegraph at, 376
- Cliff House (San Francisco), 193
- Clifton (Virginia), troops near, 396
- Clinton, mention of, 150; trip to, 231; railroad at, 251
- Clinton (steamboat), Iowans on, 92, 93
- Clinton County, vigilantes in, 363; resident of, 365
- Clinton House (Iowa City), visit to, 249
- Coast and Geodetic Survey, expedition sent by, 58
- Code of 1851, chapter of, 390
- Coffin, J. H. C., interest of, in eclipse, 59, 60
- Coffin, need of, 343
- Cole, C. C., address by, 410
- Colesburg, trip to, 229
- College, building of, 228



- Columbia, District of, government of, 280  
 Columbia River, expedition to, 8, 9  
 Columbian Museum, mention of, 157  
 Columbus, Christopher, replicas of ships of, 163  
 Columbus (Ohio), trip to, 232  
 "Comequick", death of, 362  
*Comment by the Editor*, 42-44, 73-76, 105-108, 137-139, 174-176, 223, 224, 262-264, 303, 304, 335, 336, 371, 372, 403, 404, 422-424  
 Communications, sending of, 373  
 Company A, location of, 181, 186, 207  
 Company B, location of, 181, 186; work of, 208, 211  
 Company C, location of, 181, 185; work of, 208  
 Company D, location of, 181, 186, 207; work of, 215  
 Company E, location of, 181, 185; work of, 208, 211  
 Company F, location of, 181, 186, 207  
 Company G, departure of, 181; location of, 181, 186; work of, 208, 211  
 Company H, location of, 181, 186, 207; work of, 208; member of, 208  
 Company I, location of, 181, 186; work of, 206, 208, 211  
 Company K, location of, 181, 186; work of, 205, 208, 211  
 Company L, location of, 181, 185, 187; work of, 211  
 Company M, location of, 181, 185, 187; victory of, 193; work of, 208, 211  
 Conboy, Peter, arrest of, 99; trial of, 100, 102, 103; acquittal of, 102, 103, 104  
 Concord (Massachusetts), 412  
 Concord (New Hampshire), 354  
 Confederates, retreat of, 394; location of, 398; advance of, 400, 401, 402  
 Congress, Indian legislation of, 21, 27, 28; appropriations by, 77, 78, 147, 375; resolution passed by, 178; war declared by, 178; candidate for, 273; bills introduced in, 353  
 Congress of All Nations, Iowa band before, 158  
 Conklin, Peter, death of, 366, 367  
 Conkling, Roscoe, friend of, 282  
 Conservative, comment on, 303, 304  
 Cook, Isaac, service of, as judge, 100, 101, 102  
 Cook, Jesse H., 248  
 Cooly, Eldad, office of, 364  
 COOPER, VERNOM, *A Diligent Public Servant*, 265-283  
 Corn Palace Club, parade of, 287  
 Cornell, Ezra, telegraph promoted by, 376, 393  
 Cornell College, founding of, 256  
 Corning, troops from, 180, 181, 186  
 Correctionville, description of, 341  
 Corregidor Island (Philippine Islands), passing of, 200, 219; hospital at, 210  
 Corry, Mr., work of, 369  
 Council Bluffs, river traffic of, 128-136; *Omaha* at, 132, 135; mention of, 150; troops from, 181, 185; hospitality of, 187; trip to, 187, 408; arrival of troops at, 222; description of, 243, 244, 319; log house near, 245; road to, 247; departure from, 249; immigrants in, 264; delegate from, 294; campaign at, 300; location of, 321; barracks at, 328; Indians at, 328, 329; name of, 330; mill at, 333; park system of, 405; ferry at, 407  
 Council Bluffs Indian Agency, location of, 321; treaty signed at, 328; miller appointed at, 329  
*Council of 1825, The Great*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 305-318  
 Council Point, naming of, 328  
 Court of Honor (World's Fair), 162, 163  
 Court of Nations (World's Fair), view of, 159  
 Cows, price of, 337  
 Crawford, Louis, trade of, 17  
 Creoles, mention of, 4, 5  
 Creston, blue grass palaces at, 146, 148; troops from, 180, 181, 186; journey to, 347  
*Crisis, The Present*, 270  
 Crocker Post, G. A. R., services at, 184  
 Crook, George, troops of, 395, 396, 397, 399  
 Crooks, Ramsay, powers of, 25  
 Crosby, James O., presence of, at World's Fair, 159  
 Crummy Hotel (Iowa City), opinion of Shipp regarding, 227  
 Cuba, conditions in, 177; resolution concerning, 178  
 "Cuba, Marching through", singing of, 179  
 Culi Culi Church, battalion headquarters near, 207, 210  
 Currier, Harriet Z., marriage of, 351  
 Curtis, Alfred, arrest of, 99; trial of, 100, 102, 103; acquittal of, 102, 103, 104



- Custer battlefield, Wicks buried near, 333  
 Customs duties, investigation of, 278  
*Daily Iowan*, issuing of, at exhibition, 81, 82  
 Dairymen's Association, Northeastern Iowa, exhibit of, 89  
 Dakota, earthenware from, 135  
 Dakota Indians, villages of, 170  
 Dakota Territory, 288  
 Dam, description of, 323  
 Davenport, George, trading activities of, 25, 26, 27, 39, 40, 309, 310; murder of, 361  
 Davenport, prisoners taken to, 99; trial in, 102; mention of, 150; trip to, 226; wool sold at, 227; arrival at, 235, 249; telegraph at, 389, 392  
 Davenport *Gazette*, comment in, 389  
 Davenport *Iowa Democratic Banner*, comment in, 392  
 Davis, Jefferson, arrival of, at exhibit, 84, 85  
 Dawes, Henry L., appointment of, 276  
 Dearborn Observatory, astronomer from, 67  
 Debts, payment of, 357, 358  
 Decorah (Chief), band of, 258; mention of, 307  
 Decorah, display from, 89; population of, 253  
 Decorah Drum Corps, part of, at exposition, 93; parade of, 287  
 Deer, abundance of, 35  
 Delhi, description of, 229; trip to, 231; population of, 253; conditions in, 259, 260  
 Deloit, Mormon settlement at, 340; hogs at, 340  
 Democrats, resolutions of, 149; Allison supported by, 286  
 Denison, station at, 340; provisions at, 340; mention of, 341; game near, 341  
 Denver (Colorado), hospitality of, 188  
 Depew, Chauncey M., objection of, to Allison, 265, 266; candidacy of, 266; ballots for, 289, 290, 291  
 De Smet, Pierre Jean, work of, 42, 43; mission founded by, 320, 321  
 Des Moines, fort near, 17; eclipse at, 59, 61, 66, 67, 71; displays from, 91; Joe Fallon taken to, 144; commission meetings at, 147; Iowa State fair at, 148; mention of, 150; band from, 158; word from, 179; departure of guardsmen for, 180; troops at, 181, 182; excursions to, 184; hospitality of residents of, 184; companies furnished by, 184; troops from, 186; escort of people from, 186; journey from, 187, 188; officers detailed at, 190; trip to, 228, 236-241, 245, 246; fare to, 235; land near, 241, 242; capitol at, 264; convention at, 284, 292; reunion at, 409-413; speech at, 413, 418, 419, 420; reporters in, 418  
 Des Moines Club, parade of, 287  
 Des Moines Rapids, post near, 19  
 Des Moines River, fort near, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19; trade along, 18, 19, 26; bridge over, 48, 55; cut of, facing 48; valley of, 61, 228, 264; Indians along, 123, 124, 127, 164-173; rapids of, 309; boundary at, 317; crossing of, 338; vigilance committees near, 363; telegraph lines across, 376, 381; navigability of, 404  
 Des Moines River Improvement, land grant to, 352, 353, 354  
 Des Moines River Navigation and Railroad Company, land of, 352, 353  
 Des Moines Valley, storm in, 45-55  
 Des Moines Valley Railroad, mention of, 410  
*Des Moines Valley Whig and Keokuk Register*, telegraph used by, 381  
 Detroit (Michigan), Manuel Lisa in, 6; French in, 117; trading post at, 119; massacre at, 120; expedition at, 121; trip to, 233; mention of, 308; telegraph at, 376  
 Devans, John, land of, 63  
 Devil's Slough, crossing of, 338  
 Dewey, George, fleet of, 201, 203, 204, 219; comment of, 203; conference of, 205  
 De Witt, railroad at, 251; population of, 253; newspapers in, 258  
 Diamond Creamery Company, display of, 89  
 Dillon, John F., service of, as judge, 102  
 Dingley tariff, 278  
 Dinner, description of, 239  
 Dirt Lodge, trade at, 19  
 "Dixie," playing of, 84, 93  
 Dixon (Illinois), telegraph at, 378  
 Dobson, Austin, quotation from, 139  
 Dodge, Henry, treaty made by, 105  
 Dolland telescope, use of, 60  
 Doliver, Jonathan P., friend of, 282; office of, 284; speech of, 284, 285, 292; comment of, 300  
 Donahue, Patrick, death of, 47, 48, 52



- Douglas, James, interest of, in eclipse, 59  
Dow, Charles, arrest of, 99; part of, in trial, 100  
Drake, Francis M., motion of, 293  
Drouillard, George, expedition of, 2, 3  
Dubuque, Julien, claim of, 16, 150; grave of, 310  
Dubuque, school at, 53; monument in, 54; displays from, 80, 91; mention of, 150, 253; grotto from, 156; trip to, 226, 230, 231; towns near, 250; cattle driven to, 251; newspapers in, 258, 373; ferries at, 263; description of, 271; delegation from, 286; miners in, 359; telegraph at, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 381; telegraph rate to, 391  
Dubuque Allison Club, parade of, 287  
Dubuque and Pacific Railroad, extent of, 250, 271; depot of, 259  
Dubuque Drum Corps, part of, at exposition, 93  
Dubuque *Herald*, Newman letter printed in, 297  
Dubuque Mines, trade at, 19, 26  
Dubuque *Weekly Times*, trips of editor of, 250-261  
Dubuque Western Railroad, 250, 251  
Duggan, Major, command of, 207  
Duggan, William J., kindness of, 186; wound received by, 212  
Duncombe, Mrs. John F., decorations by, 153  
Dunkards, hostility of, 395  
Dunlap, part of, in World's Fair, 153  
Dunleith (Illinois), fort near, 14, 15  
Dumas, Alexander, writings of, 74  
Eads Bridge (St. Louis), tour to, 82  
Earll, Lucy, marriage of, 388  
Earlville, name of, 250  
Early, Jubal A., command of, 394, 395, 396, 398, 399, 401, 402  
Eastman, J. R., interest of, in eclipse, 66  
Eclipse, cut of, facing 72  
*Eclipse of 1869, The*, by BEN HUR WILSON, 56-72  
*Editor, Comment by the*, 42-44, 73-76, 105-108, 137-139, 174-176, 223, 224, 262-264, 303, 304, 335, 336, 371, 372, 403, 404, 422-424  
*Editor, Gleanings of an*, by FRANK A. MULLIN, 250-261  
Editors, telegraph utilized by, 373  
EDMUNDSON, J. D., *In Honor of the Flag*, 141-145  
"Educated Man, The", lecture on, 257  
Education, interest in, 255-257, 419, 420; political issue on, 415; State support of higher, 417, 418  
Edwards, G. W., comment by, 113  
Eighteenth Street (Des Moines), 186  
Eighteenth United States Infantry, expedition of, 201, 202  
Eldora, trip to, 229  
Eldora Band, playing of, at exposition, 93  
El Dorado, mention of, 131, 360  
Electricity Building (World's Fair), 161  
Elk, abundance of, 35; herd of, 340  
Elkader, mill at, 230, 259  
Ellsworth, Anne, message sent by, 375  
Ely, John S., appointment of, 77, 79  
Emeline, vigilantes at, 363, 364  
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, rule of, 304  
Emory, William H., command of, 396, 397  
ERIKSSON, ERIK MCKINLEY, *The Boyd Wilkinson Case*, 95-104  
ERIKSSON, ERIK MCKINLEY, *Presidential Hopes*, 284-294  
Esplanade (World's Fair), view of, 159, 161  
Estes House (Keokuk), observatory at, 66  
Eulalia, Princess, music for, 158  
Europe, Grant's speech discussed in, 417  
Evangeline, character of, 75  
Executive Council, commission appointed by, 147  
*Excelsior* (packet), trip on, 230  
Expeditions, conducting of, 1-13  
Explorers, coming of, to America, 117, 118  
Exposition (New Orleans), description of buildings of, 85, 86, 87, 88, 90, 91  
Exposition, Board of Management of, 158, 159  
Exposition wharf (New Orleans Fair), 93  
Farallones, 220  
Fairall, Herbert S., appointment of, 77; work of, 78, 81, 82; office of, 79  
Fairall, S. H., law office of, 96  
Fairfield, description of, 228  
Fallon, Joe, story of, 141-145  
Faribault, Jean Baptiste, trade of, 17, 20  
Farley, railroad in, 250  
*Farm, Buying a, in 1866*, by CHARLES D. KIRKPATRICK, 346-350  
Farmers, speeches to, 277  
Farnham, Russell, trade of, 27, 39, 40  
Faulkner, Robert, interest of, in eclipse, 59



- Fayette, cattle driven from, 251; description of, 261
- Felkner, Henry, part of, in Wilkin-son case, 97
- Female College, location of, 256
- Ferries, use of, 337, 338, 352
- Ferris Wheel, opening of, 158
- Festival Hall (World's Fair), 162
- Field School, pupil of, 268, 269
- Fiftieth Iowa Infantry, naming of, 183; entrainment of, 184
- Fifty-first Iowa Infantry, history of, 177-222; name of, 181, 183; rifle team of, 193; football team of, 193, 194, 197; casualties in, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216; officers of, opposite 212; camp made by, 214
- Fifty-second Iowa Infantry, naming of, 183; entrainment of, 184
- Finance, Committee on, member of, 280
- First Battalion, departure of, 186; companies of, 207; march of, 210; attack of, 212; work of, 213, 214, 215
- Fisher's Hill, troops near, 402
- Flag, In Honor of the*, by J. D. EDMUNDSON, 141-145
- Flag, Union, shooting at, 142
- Flags, presentation of, 179; flying of, 409
- Fletcher, Thomas C., address by, 410
- Flint Hills, trade at, 19, 26
- Florence (Nebraska), thieves near, 407
- Flowers, kinds of, 235
- Floyd County, literary association in, 257
- Floyd River, valley of, 135
- Pond du Lac (Wisconsin), Indian from, 315
- Football, playing of, 193, 194
- Forest City, flax palace at, 146, 148; trip to, 250
- Forestville, description of, 231
- Forsyth, John S., office of, 364
- Forsyth, Robert, presence of, at council, 307
- Forsyth, Thomas, presence of, at council, 307; note to, 309; departure of, 310
- Fort Armstrong, erection of, 25; Indians near, 105; proposed council at, 308
- Fort Baker, passing of, 220
- Fort Calhoun, location of, 407; hunter at, 408
- Fort Chartres, French in, 117; return to, 127
- Fort Crawford, council at, 310, 312; description of, 313; life at, 318
- Fort Croghan, ceremonies at, 328; mention of, 332
- Fort Des Moines, price of land at, 228; arrival at, 240; traveller from, 245; road to, 247
- Fort Dodge, cementico from, 153; gypsum from, 156; mention of, 236; trip to, 250; population of, 253; interest of, in education, 256; description of, 259, 338; migration to, 264; orator from, 284
- Fort Edwards, post at, 26; visit to, 309
- Fort Lisa, erecting of, 5; Manuel Lisa at, 11
- Fort Madison, erection of, 18, 19, 20; destruction of, 21; mention of, 150; resident of, 382
- Fort Mandan, Manuel Lisa at, 9
- Fort Manuel, building of, 3; mention of, 5
- Fort Point, salute fired from, 196; passing of, 220
- Fort Raymond, building of, 3
- Fort Rice (Philippine Islands), location of, 206; companies recalled from, 208
- Fort Riley, commander of, 236
- Fort Union, incident at, 43, 44
- Forts, early, 3, 5, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 32, 43, 44, 118
- Forty-ninth Iowa Infantry, naming of, 183
- Fourteenth General Assembly, session of, 298
- Fourth Cavalry, scouting party of, 211
- Fourth of July, celebration of, 190
- Fox, William, 361
- Fox, abundance of, 35
- Fox Indians, trade with, 15, 18, 39, 40, 41; treaty with, 105; trouble with, 119-127; villages of, 172; council with, 305, 306; agent of, 307; feud with, 307; departure of, 310; arrival of, 311; war with, 313; chief of, 315; land of, 317, 319, 320
- Fox-Wisconsin portage, 30, 119, 307, 310
- France, mention of, 73; territory of, 117-127; plat of, at World's Fair, 148; commissioners from, 157
- Franklin, Benjamin, 382
- Franklin Institute (Philadelphia), interest of, in eclipse, 58, 59, 60
- Free Soil campaign, holding of, 266
- Freeman, Michael, arrest of, 99, 100
- Freight facilities, lack of, 251
- Frémont, John C., candidacy of, 271
- French, trade with, 14, 15, 30-41



- French-Canadians, mention of, 4, 5;  
trade of, 31  
Funeral, holding of, 343, 344  
Fur trade, map of, 22, 23; epic of,  
42-44  
*Fur Trade, The*, by GEO. F. ROBESON,  
1-41  
*Fur Trade in Early Iowa*, by GEO. F.  
ROBESON, 14-29  
*Fur Traders, Life Among the*, by  
GEO. F. ROBESON, 30-41
- Gaines, Richard P., play of, 194  
Galena (Illinois), telegraph at, 378  
Game, kinds of, 35; abundance of,  
341, 342, 405  
Garfield, James A., service of, 266;  
promise concerning, 276; wish of,  
280, 281; friend of, 282  
Garnavillo, schools in, 255, 256  
Garretson, Joel C., pole secured by,  
113, 114  
Garretson, O. A., accident to, 113,  
115  
GARRETSON, O. A., *A Lincoln Pole  
Raising*, 109-116  
Gear, John H., work of, 286  
General Assembly, indifference of,  
78; sessions of, 272, 298  
General Land Office, patent of, 332  
Germans, residence of, in Chicago,  
234  
Germany, commissioners from, 157  
Gertrude, reference to, 255  
Gettysburg (Pennsylvania), college  
at, 60; mention of, 273; battle of,  
394  
Giard, Basil, grant to, 16; post of,  
19  
Gilbert, John, trading post of, 106  
Gilman, W. S., interest of, in eclipse,  
64  
"Girl I Left Behind Me, The", play-  
ing of, 193  
Glass, Hugh, fate of, 43  
Glee Club, Wide Awake, songs by,  
114  
Glenwood, pioneers near, 141, 142;  
Joe Fallon in, 144; troops from,  
180, 181, 185; site of, 322  
Gold standard, adoption of, 279  
Golden, Robert, 248  
Golden Gate, 196, 220  
*Golden Gate, By the*, by BRUCE E.  
MAHAN, 187-194  
Golden Gate Avenue (San Francis-  
co), 189  
Gordon, John B., command of, 396  
Goshen Township (Muscatine Coun-  
ty), ferry in, 338  
Gould, Jav, 423  
Government and State Building  
(New Orleans Fair), description  
of, 86, 87, 91, 92, 93  
Governor, courses open to, 301, 302;  
commission appointed by, 353  
GRAHAME, ORVILLE F., *The Vigilance  
Committees*, 359-370  
Grand Army of the Republic, escort  
of, 180, 186; services conducted  
by, 184  
Grand Avenue (Des Moines), 186  
Grand Medicin Societé, 171, 172  
Grand Opera House (Des Moines),  
convention at, 284  
Grand Pacific Hotel (Chicago), Iowa  
headquarters at, 286  
Grant, Jesse, question of, 423, 424  
Grant, Ulysses S., administration of,  
281; work of, 394; campaign  
planned by, 395, 396; presence of,  
at reunion, 409, 410; address by,  
411-413, 418, 420, 421; criticisms  
of speech of, 413-421; characteri-  
zation of, 413, 422-424; views of,  
415, 416; statement of, 417; letter  
from, 420; manuscript of, 420  
*Grant's Des Moines Speech*, by J. A.  
SWISHER, 409-421  
Grasshoppers, destruction by, 342,  
343  
Gray, Henry, part of, in Wilkinson  
case, 98, 99; arrest of, 99  
Great Father, reference to, 306, 313  
Great Lakes, wilderness around, 117;  
trip made by way of, 226; mention  
of, 310  
Great Platte River, mouth of, 320  
Greece, epics of, 43  
Greeley, Horace, advice of, 351  
Green Bay (Wisconsin), trading post  
at, 119, 120, 126; Indians from,  
311  
Gresham, Walter Q., rival of, 265;  
nomination of, 287; ballots for,  
289, 291  
Grimes, James W., politics of, 264;  
approval of, 272; opinion of, 404  
Grinnell, displays from, 91; descrip-  
tion of, 239; road to, 247; men-  
tion of college in, 418  
Gros-Ventres Indians, expedition to  
village of, 5  
Grover, Cuvier, command of, 397,  
399, 400  
Gutta-percha crossing, construction  
of, 392
- Haight, S., reputation of, 387  
Hale, Irving, command of, 210, 212,  
213  
Hall, Eugene J., poem by, 53  
Hall, John, part of, in pole raising,  
112



- Hand Book of Iowa*, A, issuing of, 157
- Hannibal and St. Joseph Railway, reputation of, 135
- Harkness, William, interest of, in eclipse, 59, 71
- Harlan, James, successor of, 295; senatorial campaign of, 296-301; votes for, 298, 299; opinion of, 404
- Harlan-Allison campaign, 296-301
- Harper's Ferry, troops at, 395
- Harrison, Benjamin, rival of, 265; votes for, 265, 289, 290, 291, 292; appointment by, 279; wish of, 280, 281; nomination of, 288
- Harrison, Frederic, remark of, 174
- Harrison, William Henry, mention of, 12
- Hart's Cutoff, location of, 405
- Harvey, Alexander, exploits of, 43, 44
- Havana Harbor, ship sunk in, 177
- Hawaii, view of, 197
- Hayes, Rutherford B., opinion of, 281
- Headquarters Staff, departure of, 186; work of, 210
- Heloska Society, dancers of, 172
- Henderson, David B., work of, 286; nomination withdrawn by, 292
- Henry, Major Andrew, expedition of, 6, 7, 9
- Henry County, pole raising in, 109-116
- Hepburn, W. P., work of, 286; Allison nominated by, 288
- Hepburn Act, 279, 280
- Hiawatha, 307
- Hidatsa Indians, villages of, 169
- High Point Chapel (Ottumwa), location of, 63
- High Street (Keokuk), telegraph mast on, 381, 382
- Hildreth, Reuben, appointment of, as miller, 327
- Hiscock, Frank, 290
- History, elements of, 137, 138; imagination in, 174-176
- Hoar, George F., statement of, 284; authority of, 290
- Hobbes, Thomas, causes of war defined by, 223
- Hogan, Dennis, arrest of, 99, 100
- Hogs, price of, 340
- Holcomb, Samuel N., contract of, 323, 326, 327
- Holly Springs (Mississippi), reception at, 82
- Holmes, Oliver Wendell, relative of, 387
- HOLT, EDGAR A., *A Voyage of the Omaha*, 128-136
- Home, Prospecting for a New*, by BESSIE L. LYON, 225-232
- Home Again*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 218-222
- Homer, trip from, 228
- Homesteader, The Trials of a*, by CHARLES H. MORRILL, 351-358
- Honey Creek, cottage on, 45; storm on, 46, 47, 49, 50, 51; bridge over, 51
- Honolulu (Hawaii Territory), trip to, 196; hospitality of, 197
- Hook's Point, location of, 352; store at, 355, 356
- Hopkinton, schools in, 256; prediction concerning, 258, 259; temperance society in, 261
- Horr, Asa, interest of, in eclipse, 64
- Horse thieves, rendezvous of, 407; hunting of, 407, 408; hanging of, 408
- Horses, stealing of, 359, 360, 361, 406; recovery of, 408
- Horticultural Building (World's Fair), description of, 161
- Horticultural Hall (New Orleans Fair), description of, 86, 90
- House, building of, 339
- House of Representatives (U. S.), members of, 266, 273
- Hover Brothers, photography of, 71
- Hudson (Ohio), college at, 269
- Hudson Bay, mention of, 44
- Hull, J. A. T., message of, 192
- Hume, John T., troops commanded by, 185, 206, 211
- Hunt, Wilson Price, expedition led by, 8, 9
- Hunting, 35, 36, 341, 342, 405, 406
- Huntington, W. C., work of, at exposition, 91
- Huron Indians, part of, in expedition, 121, 122
- Husbandry, Patrons of, founder of, 388
- Huston, C. A., work of, 89
- Hyde, Orson, train of, 331
- Ida Grove, elk at, 340; purchases at, 341; tavern at, 341
- Idaho, mines in, 333
- Illinois, trading posts in, 15; highways of, 262; settlers from, 263; support from, 285, 291; delegates from, 290; Indians in, 320; trip from, 346, 350; horses taken to, 360, 361; messages transmitted in, 389; telegraph in, 393
- Illinois and Mississippi Telegraph Company, decline of, 393
- Illinois Central Railroad, route of, 82; building of, 344



- Illinois country, French in, 117  
 Illinois Indians, war upon, 119, 120; villages of, 122  
 Illinois River, homestead on, 346  
 Illinois River Valley Line, building of, 376  
 Iloilo (Philippine Islands), condition at, 201; trip to, 202; capture of, 203  
 Independence, schools in, 255; mention of, 259; conditions in, 260  
 Independence Hall (Philadelphia), Liberty Bell from, 83, 84  
 India, parade for "King of Kings" of, 158  
 Indian Affairs, Commissioner of, approval of, 326, 327; request of, 332  
 Indian Affairs, Committee on, chairman of, 280  
 Indian Affairs, Superintendent of, order from, 330  
 Indian agents, powers of, 24, 25; mill accepted by, 327  
 Indian council of 1825, cut of, facing 312  
 Indian country, horse thieves in, 407  
 Indian Creek, village on, 322  
 Indian Office, records of, 320; delegation sent to, 328; claim rejected by, 331  
 Indiana, city of, 255; settlers from, 263; presidential nominee from, 287, 288, 289; Indians in, 320  
 Indians, trade with, 1-41; presence of, in North America, 117-127; description of, 164-173, 312; escape from, 225, 226; meeting with, 244; danger from, 268; welfare of, 280; council with, 305-318; presents for, 308; hostility among, 313; boundary disputes among, 317; treaty with, 320, 322, 328; mill built for, 327  
 Industry, protection of, 277  
 Interior, Secretary of the, 296  
 Interstate Commerce Act, support of, 279  
 Iowa, expeditions through, 5, 121-127; purchase of, 18; eclipse seen in, 56-72; prizes won by, 89, 90, 91; capital of, 106-108; mottoes of, 150, 160; part of, in Spanish-American War, 177-222; description of, 225, 226, 250-261; travel in, 225-261; wool in, 227; population of towns in, 252, 253, 258; admission of, to Union, 262, 270; immigration to, 262-264; delegate from, 266, 267; coming of W. B. Allison to, 272; campaign in, 273; confidence of people of, 282; favorite son of, 284, 285, 288; votes from, 291; Indian names in, 307; Indians in, 319, 328; A. J. Whisman in, 337-345; land in, 346, 347; purchase of farm in, 346-350; vigilance committees in, 359-370; thieves in, 366; telegraph in, 373-393; residents of, 408; reunion in, 409-413  
*Iowa, A Handbook of*, 157  
*Iowa, Fur Trade in Early*, by GEO. F. ROBESON, 14-29  
*Iowa at the New Orleans Fair*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 77-94  
*Iowa at the World's Fair*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 146-163  
 Iowa Board of Lady Managers, reception held by, 160, 162  
 Iowa City, commission from, 81, 82; display from, 91, 92, 93; Philip Clark in, 95, 96, 97; Boyd Wilkinson case in, 95-104; site of, 106-108; trip to, 227, 232, 234, 235, 249; ticket to, 233; road to, 247; capitol at, 264; bridge at, 338; telegraph at, 389, 391; telegraph rate to, 391; mention of, 420  
*Iowa City Republican*, part of, in exhibit, 81; contents of, 391  
 Iowa College, faculty of, 417, 418  
 Iowa Commission, organization of, 79; work of, 79-94, 147-163  
 Iowa country, Indians in, 307, 317  
 Iowa Cultivator (painting), 154  
 Iowa Day, observance of, at exhibit, 92, 93, 94, 160-163  
 Iowa delegation, work of, 286, 287, 288  
 Iowa Falls, band of, 258; prediction concerning, 258  
 Iowa Institute of Science and Arts, interest of, in eclipse, 64  
 Iowa National Guard, sending of, to exposition, 92, 159; mobilization of, 178, 179, 181; departure of, 179, 180, 181; arrival of, at Des Moines, 182; apprehension among, 183  
 Iowa Protection Company of Benton County, 362, 364, 365  
 Iowa River, trade along, 18, 19, 26; land on, 104; Indians on, 105, 106; valley of, 264; bridge over, 338; vigilance committees near, 363  
 Iowa State Building (Chicago), 147, 148, 152, 153, 154, 158, 159, 160, 162  
 Iowa State Capitol, fireworks at, 162  
 Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, cadet band from, 161



- Iowa State Register*, comment in, 415, 416; speech misquoted in, 417, 418
- Iowa State Teachers' Association, address before, 419
- Iowa State University Band, playing of, at exposition, 93
- Iowa troops, commander of, 410
- Iowa Was Young, When*, by JOHN ELY BRIGGS, 117-127
- Iowa Weekly Republican*, quotations from, 95, 100
- Ioway Indians, trade with, 15, 18, 39; land of, 120, 319, 320; description of, 164-173; meeting with, 309; arrival of, 311; chief of, 316
- Ioway Village, An*, by ALANSON SKINNER, 164-173
- Ireland, immigrants from, 267
- Irish, F. M., arrest of, 99; trial of, 99-102; son of, 101
- Irish, John P., part of, in trial, 101
- Irish, trade of, 31; residence of, in Chicago, 234
- Iroquois Indians, part of, in expedition, 121-127
- Ithaca (New York), resident of, 376
- Jackson, Andrew, ball of, 267
- Jackson, James, office of, 257
- Jackson, Thomas Jonathan, work of, 395
- Jackson County, thieves in, 360, 361; woods in, 361; vigilantes in, 363, 366
- Jackson County Vigilance Committee, policy of, 366
- Jackson Park (Chicago), plat of, 148; visitors to, 150
- Jackson Township (Henry County), Lincoln pole raising in, 109-116
- Jacksonville (Florida), camp at, 184
- Jacksonville (Illinois), telegraph at, 376, 377, 378
- Japan, mention of, 219
- Jarnagin, J. W., address by, 160
- Jasper County, county seat of, 239
- Jefferson, eclipse at, 59, 63
- Jefferson City (Missouri), travellers at, 128
- Jesuits, missionary work of, 119, 320, 321
- Johnson, Andrew, impeachment of, 274
- Johnson, Bill, courtship of, 75
- Johnson, Isaac, experiment of, 382
- Johnson County, murder case in, 95-104; first white settler of, 95, 106; State capital in, 106, 107, 108; thieves in, 361, 366; vigilantes in, 363
- Jones, William F., pole raising aided by, 110, 113, 114
- Jones County, thieves' station in, 361; vigilantes in, 363
- Junior Literary Association, meeting of, 257
- Jury of Awards, prize given by, 154
- Kahquados (Indian Chief), part of, in pageant, 305
- Kanesville, name of, 330; land office at, 331
- Kansas, review of troops from, 192; Indians in, 320, 328, 329
- Kansas-Nebraska Act, 128
- Kansas regiment, rifle team of, 193
- Kansas River, Indians near, 10
- Kaskaskia, French in, 117
- Kate Shelley bridge, 55
- KECK, INEZ, A. J. *Whisman, Pioneer*, 337-345
- Keeney, Mary Hempstead, marriage of, 13
- Keiths, price of land at, 228; description of, 246
- Kelley, Oliver Hudson, sketch of life of, 387, 388; advertisement of, 389; work of, 404
- Kentucky, settlers from, 262, 263
- Keokuk (Indian Chief), portrait of, 151; mention of, 307; description of, 312; speech of, 316; boundaries defined by, 317
- Keokuk, eclipse at, 66, 67, 71; displays from, 91; mention of, 150; railroad at, 259; newspaper of, 263, 373; telegraph at, 376, 377, 381, 382, 387, 391; telegraph operator at, 387; telegraph rate to, 391
- Keokuk's Reserve, sale of, 105
- Keota, land near, 349
- Kickapoo Indians, part of, in expedition, 122, 123, 125
- Kinsman Post, G. A. R., services conducted by, 184
- KIRKPATRICK, CHARLES D., *Buying a Farm in 1866*, 346-350
- Kirkpatrick, Theophilus, diary of, 346; homestead of, 346; trip of, 347-349; land purchased by, 349, 350; son of, 350; coming of, to Iowa, 350
- Kirkwood, Samuel J., staff of, 272; candidacy of, 272; appointment by, 295; letter of, 419, 420
- Klondike trade, ship engaged in, 195
- Knox, Joseph, service of, as attorney, 101, 102
- Knoxville, troops from, 181, 186; escort of people from, 186; railroad at, 350



- La Point, trading post at, 119  
 La Porte (Indiana), reference to, 255  
 La Porte City, founding of, 255  
 Laborer, status of, 277  
 Lafayette (Indiana), location of, 122  
 Laframboise, Joseph, band of, 321; contract of, 323, 327; canvass made by, 326  
 Lake Erie, telegraph line to, 376  
 Lake Michigan, route along, 122; Iowa plat near, 148; view of, 159, 161; mention of, 307; Indians from, 311  
 Lamar, L. Q. C., excursion greeted by, 82  
 Land, price of, 337, 347, 348, 349, 350, 353, 356, 357; improvements on, 353  
 Lansing, temperance society in, 261  
 Latimer, N. J., 248  
 Law, John, part of, in "Mississippi Bubble", 117  
 Layo Indians (see Loup Indians)  
 "Le Moine Factory" (see Fort Madison)  
 Leacox, S. K., trip of, 347-350; errand explained by, 348  
 Lee, F. H., land in charge of, 95, 96  
 Lee, M. Z., land bought by, 96  
 Lee, Robert E., work of, 394, 395  
 Lee County, land in, 16; trade in, 110; delegations from, 114; thieves' station in, 361  
 Legislature, appropriations by, 418 (see also General Assembly)  
 Leland Stanford University, football game with, 193  
 Lewis, James O., painting of, 313  
 Lewis, Meriwether, mention of, 4  
 Lewis, arrival at, 242; passing of, 245  
 Lewis and Clark, expedition of, 1, 2, 9, 19  
 Lexington, anniversary of battle of, 177, 178; mention of, 412  
 Libby, Mr., interest of, in eclipse, 71  
 Liberal Arts Building (World's Fair), description of, 157  
 Liberty Bell, exhibit of, 83, 84  
 Lightning, effect of, on telegraph, 285  
 Lincoln, Abraham, cheers for, 115; nomination of, 266, 267, 272; fame of, 410  
 Lincoln, James Rush, cadets in charge of, 161, 162; camp organized by, 182  
*Lincoln Pole Raising, A*, by O. A. GARRETSON, 109-116  
 Lindley, James, service of, as attorney, 102  
 Linn County, eclipse at, 65; description of, 229; thieves in, 360; protective association in, 362  
 Lisa, Manuel, cut of, facing 1; early life of, 1, 2; expeditions of, 2-13, 34, 35; marriages of, 12, 13; death of, 13; trade of, 19, 20; appointment of, 21  
*Lisa, Manuel*, by GEO. F. ROBESON, 1-13  
 Lisa, Mrs. Manuel, trip of, 11  
 Lisa, Mitian, children of, 13  
 Lisa, Rosalie, education of, 13  
 Lisbon, population of, 253  
 Literature, 73, 74, 75, 76  
 Little Sioux River, prairie near, 337, 338; game near, 341; settlers along, 344  
 Lone Buffalo (Indian), *Omaha* visited by, 133  
 Long, Aaron, 361  
 Long, John, 361  
 Long, John D., office of, 270  
 Long, Stephen H., expedition made by, 11  
 Longfellow, Henry W., characters of, 75  
 Loper, John C., message received by, 185, 186, 192; cut of, facing 188; arrival of, at Camp Merritt, 189; holiday granted by, 193; kindness of, 197; command of, 204, 215; conference with, 205; order of, 205; illness of, 210; praise of, 216  
 London, astronomer from, 59  
 Louis XIII, reign of, 74  
 Louis XV, representative of, 117  
 Louisa County, thieves' station in, 361  
 Louisiana, French régime in, 117; campaigns in, 397  
 Louisiana, Upper, Governor of, 15  
 Louisiana Purchase, date of, 150  
 Louisville (Kentucky), telegraph at, 376  
 Loup Indians, trade with, 16  
 Lowden, site of, 369  
 Lowder, Jesse, lease secured by, 330; claim of, 331  
 Lowe, Ralph P., pardon given by, 103  
 Lowell, James Russell, book by, 270  
 Luneta, landing at, 207  
 Luzon (Philippine Islands), 200  
 LYON, BESSIE L., *Prospecting for a New Home*, 225-232  
 Lyons, R. A., work of, 365  
 Lyons, drill corps from, 161, 162; population of, 253; college at, 256; newspapers in, 258  
 MacArthur, Arthur, command of, 210; comment of, 214, 217



- Macbeth, mention of, 74  
 Macbride, T. H., work of, at exposition, 88  
 McCleary, George W., service of, as judge, 99  
 McClellan, J. W., interest of, in eclipse, 65  
 McCraith, Patrick, arrest of, 99, 100  
 McCrory, Samuel H., part of, in Wilkinson case, 97  
 McCulloch, Hugh, policy of, 274  
 McCullough, Canada, opinion of, 369, 370  
 McFarland, Samuel, speeches by, 112  
 McGovern, Charles C., service of, as coroner, 99  
 McGregor, land near, 16; description of, 230; railroad in, 259; pageant at, 305; site of, 312  
 McGregor and Missouri Railroad, junction of, 259  
 McGuire, John, charge against, 99; part of, in trial, 100  
 Machinery Annex (New Orleans Fair), 86, 91  
 Mackay, James, report of, 16  
 Mackinac, French at, 117, 119  
 Mackinac Island, headquarters at, 25  
 McKinley, William, call for volunteers issued by, 178; wish of, 280, 281; candidacy of, 293; ballots for, 294  
 McKinley tariff, 277, 278, 281  
 Madison (Wisconsin), Iowa exhibit at, 88  
 Magellan, mention of, 11  
 Magoun, George F., article by, 418, 419  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *At Camp McKinley*, 182-186  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *The Call to Arms*, 177-181  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *The Great Council of 1825*, 305-318  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *Home Again*, 218-222  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *Iowa at the New Orleans Fair*, 77-94  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *Iowa at the World's Fair*, 146-163  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *To the Philippines*, 195-203  
 MAHAN, BRUCE E., *Under Fire*, 204-217  
 Mahaska, 307  
 Mahaska County, thieves' station in, 361; resident of, 368  
 Mahony, Dennis A., candidacy of, 273  
 Mail, delivery of, 344  
 Main Building (New Orleans Fair), description of, 84, 85, 86, 91, 93  
 Maine, presidential nominee from, 294  
*Maine* (battleship), sinking of, 177  
 Malabon (Philippine Islands), 208  
 Malolos (Philippine Islands), 208, 210, 211, 217  
 Manchester, trip to, 250; schools in, 255; lecture at, 257; name of, 260  
 Mandan Indians, fort near, 5; villages of, 5, 169; trade with, 9  
 Manila (Philippine Islands), fall of, 192; troops at, 192, 201, 207, 217, 218; outposts at, 203; attack near, 204, 205; guarding of, 208, 210; supplies from, 209; ride to, 217  
 Manila and Dagupan Railroad, route of, 208, 209  
 Manila Bay, description of, 200, 201; ships in, 203; mention of, 218  
 Mansion House (Iowa City), meeting at, 98  
 Maps, Iowa, distribution of, at exposition, 94  
 Maquoketa, population of, 253; schools in, 256; newspapers in, 258; conditions in, 260  
 Maquoketa River, trade on, 26  
 Marble Rock, literary association at, 257  
 Marengo, supper at, 237  
 Marietta, distance to, 247  
 Marilao (Philippine Islands), 208  
 Marion, trip to, 229, 232; population of, 253; description of, 254; glee club at, 258; newspapers in, 258  
 Market Street (San Francisco), 189  
 Marshall, Daniel, arrest of, 99; part of, in trial, 100  
 Marshalltown, displays from, 91; mention of, 150  
 Martinsburg (Virginia), troops near, 396  
 Martinsburg Pike, troops near, 396  
 Maryland, settlers from, 262; delegates from, 289; advance into, 395  
 Mason and Dixon line, reference to, 412  
 Massachusetts, Senator from, 284, 290; votes from, 291  
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, astronomer of, 63, 64  
 Mauser, firing of, 207  
 Mawatani Society, warriors of, 172  
 Meadville (Pennsylvania), college at, 269  
 Mechanic's Pavilion, competitive drill held in, 193  
*Men for Old, Young*, by GEO. F. ROBESON, 295-302  
 Mencken, H. L., mention of, 73  
 Menominee Indians, council with, 306; arrival of, 311



- Merriam, H. C., troops reviewed by, 192  
 Merritt, Darwin R., death of, 177  
 Methodist clergy, attempt of Harlan to win, 297  
 Mexican Building (New Orleans Fair), description of, 86  
 Mexico, war with, 270; horse from, 365  
 Miami, trading post at, 119  
 Michigan, territory of, 150; presidential nominee from, 289; jurisdiction of, 359  
 Michigan, University of, professor in, 59  
 Michigan Avenue (Chicago), description of, 234  
 Midway Plaisance (World's Fair), view of, 159, 162  
 Mill, description of, 323, 324, 325, 326; erection of, 333  
 Miller, M., command of, 210, 211; bravery of, 211  
 Miller, M. P., command of, 198, 201, 202  
 Miller, Warner, 290  
 Miller's Hollow, village at, 330  
 Millersburg, road to, 247  
 Mills Bill, 277  
 Mills County, pioneers in, 141  
 Milward and Clark, firm of, 151  
 Milwaukee (Wisconsin), railroad at, 259; telegraph at, 376  
 Mineral Ridge, mention of, 356  
 Mines and Mining Building (World's Fair), description of, 156, 157, 161  
 Minnesota, trading posts in, 15; display of, at exposition, 88; fur-bearing regions of, 119; quarries in, 311  
 Missionaries, coming of, to America, 117, 118  
 "Mississippi Bubble," 117  
 Mississippi region, Wm. Clark in, 309  
 Mississippi River, route to, 30, 119; trade on, 34, 376; crossing of, 82, 337, 347, 376; land near, 105, 117, 225; Indians along, 120; expedition along, 122; steamers on, 129; cities west of, 228; arrival at, 235; mention of, 262, 320; description of, 306; boundary at, 317; railroads west of, 347; thieves near, 361; telegraph lines to, 376, 377, 393  
 Mississippi Valley, trading in, 14-29; Indians of, 306; Indian names in, 307; vigilance committees in, 359  
 Missouri, votes from, 291; horses taken to, 360; horse thieves in, 361; residents of, 408; Governor of, 410  
 Missouri Fur Company, forming of, 4, 5; expeditions of, 8, 9, 34, 35  
 Missouri Indians, mention of, 166, 169; land of, 319, 320  
 Missouri River, country drained by, 1, 242, 348; trading on, 1-13, 19, 21; expedition up, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 34, 35; fort on, 43, 44; towns on, 117; navigation on, 128-136; mention of, 142; Indians on, 169; arrival at, 243; description of, 244, 319; railroads to, 264; boundary at, 317, 318, 320; lumber shipped on, 327, 328; flood of, 332; bed of, 405  
 Missouri River, Little, village on, 5  
 Missouri Valley, development of, 134  
 Mitchell, Sub-chief, 305  
 Mitchell, Maria, interest of, in eclipse, 62  
 Moingona, engine at, 47; station at, 47, 48, 49; station agent of, 54, 55; mention of, 75  
 Molineux, Edward L., command of, 397  
 Monona, conditions in, 260, 261  
 Monroe, price of land at, 228  
 Monroe County, horse thieves in, 361; resident of, 367  
 Montana, mines in, 333  
 Montevideo (Uruguay), United States consul at, 195, 196  
 Montezuma, road to, 247  
 Monticello, display from, 89; trip to, 250; description of, 254  
 Montreal (Canada), attempt to reach, 6; fur company at, 24; traders from, 30; furs sent to, 36, 37; astronomer from, 59; French in, 117; expedition from, 121  
 Montrose, land near, 16  
 Moon, Mr., hotel of, 229  
 Moore, Sterling P., troops in command of, 186, 205  
 Moorehead's tavern, location of, 341  
 Mormon Trail, immigrants along, 264  
 Mormons, caravan of, 238, 239; meeting with, 239, 243; settlements of, 319, 330, 340  
 Morrill, Arthur, birth of, 358  
 Morrill, Charles Albert, birth of, 355  
 Morrill, Charles H., sketch of life of, 351-358  
 MORRILL, CHARLES H., *The Trials of a Homesteader*, 351-358  
 Morrill, Mrs. Charles H., 354, 355  
 Morrill, John Henry, money borrowed from, 356, 357  
 Morrill, Justin S., work of, 266; policy of, 276



- Morrill, Lilla, birth of, 355  
 Morse, Jedidiah, investigation by, 26  
 Morse code, 383, 384, 386  
 Morton, Levi P., ballots for, 294  
 Mosquito Creek, fishing in, 319; mill on, 323; channel of, 344  
 Mottoes, Iowa, 150, 160  
 Mount Pleasant, eclipse at, 59, 63, 66, 67, 70, 71; mention of, 110, 112; delegation from, 114, 115  
 Mount Pleasant *Home Journal*, comment in, 113  
 Mount Vernon, railroad to, 251; population of, 253  
 Mua River (see Des Moines River)  
 Muir, Samuel, trade of, 26  
 Muller, Catherine, marriage of, 329  
 MULLIN, FRANK A., *Gleanings of an Editor*, 250-261  
 Muscatine, display from, 80; mention of, 150; trip to, 227; ferry at, 337; name of, 373; telegraph rate to, 391, 392; telegraph at, 392; telegraph operator at, 404 (see also Bloomington)  
 Muscatine County, ferries in, 337, 338  
 Muscatine *Journal*, advertisement in, 390  
 Music, interest in, 258  
 Mutual Protective Association of Linn County, 362  
 Myers, Eli, coming of, 105, 106  
 Nagasaki (Japan), harbor of, 219  
 Nails, lack of, 343  
 Napoleon, site of, 104; founding of, 106-108  
 Nashua, railroad at, 259  
 Nashua (New Hampshire), mention of, 351  
 National Bureau (Washington, D. C.), mention of, 157  
 National Grange, father of, 388  
 Nautical Almanac, interest of editors of, in eclipse, 64  
 Navy, United States, expedition sent by, 58, 59  
 Navy, Secretary of the, 270  
 Nebraska, poet laureate of, 43; mention of, 187; troops from, 210, 211, 212; trip to, 358; cities of, 407  
 Neihardt, John G., poems by, 43  
 Nelson, James A., anger of, 142, 143  
 Neutral Ground, hunting in, 35, 36  
 Nevada cavalry, work of, 206  
 New Boston (Illinois), ferry at, 347  
 New England, immigrants from, 254, 255, 263, 268  
 New France, plan of, 14; conquest of, 30  
 New Oregon, population of, 260  
 New Orleans (Louisiana), Manuel Lisa in, 1; trade with, 16; traders from, 30; exposition at, 77-94, 146; French in, 117; horticultural display at, 155; telegraph at, 376  
*New Orleans Fair, Iowa at the*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 77-94  
 New York, furs sent to, 36, 37; John J. Astor in, 44; traveller from, 236; county of, 255; settlers from, 263; votes from, 265, 285; custom house at, 278; presidential nominee from, 289, 294; delegates from, 290; telegraph in, 375; news from, 381; market reports from, 389; directory published in, 391; telegraph rate from, 391; comment in paper of, 414  
 New York Central and Hudson River Railroad, president of, 266, 291  
 New York City, telegraph at, 376  
 New York *Tribune*, comment in, 414, 415  
 Newman, John P., letter of, 297, 300  
*Newport* (ship), arrival of, 198, 201, 202  
 News, transmitting of, 386  
 Newspapers, number of, in Iowa, 258; announcements in, 373  
 Newton, description of, 239, 246, 247; road to, 247  
 Noyelles, Nicolas Joseph de, expedition led by, 120-127  
 Niagara Falls, trip to, 233  
 Nineteenth Army Corps, commander of, 396, 397; work of, 398; ability of, 399; casualties of, 402  
 Nineteenth General Assembly of Iowa, act of, 53, 54  
 Nineteenth Iowa Infantry, lieutenant colonel of, 112  
 Niobrara River, expeditions near, 8  
 Nishnabotna, East, village on, 322  
 No-heart-of-fear (Indian Chief), story of, 165-173  
 North America, early history of, 117, 118, 119  
 North Carolina, settlers from, 262  
 North Dakota, expeditions in, 5; troops from, 212  
 North Hill (Burlington), observatory at, 65  
 North West Company, trade of, 17  
 North Western Railroad, gifts of, to Kate Shelley, 54; bridge of, 55  
 Northern Pacific Railroad, land grant to, 280  
 Nottingham, name of, 250  
 Oahu College (Honolulu), football team of, 197



- Oakland Mole (California), arrival of troops at, 189
- O'Brien County, grasshoppers in, 343
- "Observatory Hill" (Ottumwa), 63
- O'Connor, Henry, experience of, as attorney, 102
- Ogden (Utah), arrival of troops at, 188
- Ohio, wool in, 227; trip to, 232; settlers from, 263; Free Soil campaign in, 266; frontier of, 268; college in, 269; Black Laws of, 270; student of, 285; presidential nominee from, 289, 293
- Ohio River, mention of, 14, 262; trip on, 225, 232; telegraph lines to, 376
- Ohio Valley, immigrants from, 255
- Old Stone Capitol, model of, 153
- Olmstead, George, death of, 47, 48
- Olmsted, J. A., oaths administered by, 184
- Omaha (Nebraska), fort near, 11, 19; *Omaha* at, 133, 135; mention of, 236; arrival at, 243; travellers from, 245; thieves near, 407; ferry at, 407
- Omaha, A Voyage of the*, by EDGAR A. HOLT, 128-136
- Omaha Indian Reserve, *Omaha* at, 132, 133
- Omaha Indians, villages of, 169; agency for, 407
- Onawa, mail from, 344; railroad at, 344
- Opequan Creek, troops near, 397; description of, 397, 398
- Opera House (Des Moines), reunion at, 410
- Oregon, immigration to, 128
- O'Reilly, Henry, telegraph lines built by, 375, 376, 377, 378, 387; telegraph instruments of, 383; opinion of, 404
- Osage Indians, trade with, 2, 4; presence of, at exposition, 93
- Oskaloosa, eclipse at, 59, 63; troops from, 181, 186; escort of people from, 186; mention of, 195; description of, 228; distance to, 247
- Oskaloosa College, observatory near, 63
- Oslere, C. S., message sent to, 375
- Otis, E. S., troops in command of, 189; order of, 203
- Oto, lumber purchased at, 343
- Oto Indians, mention of, 166, 169; land of, 319, 320
- Ottawa Indians, mention of, 121; council with, 306; arrival of, 311; lands of, 320
- Otter, abundance of, 35
- Ottumwa, eclipse at, 59, 63, 71; displays from, 91; coal palace at, 146, 148; mention of, 150
- Ouiatanon Indians, land of, 122
- Outlaws, offenses of, 359
- Owen, Ambrose E., appointment of, as miller, 329, 330
- Pacific House (Council Bluffs), 244
- Pacific Ocean, trip on, 196, 197
- Paducah (Kentucky), telegraph at, 379, 380
- Page, Alonzo, case of, 369
- Painted Rock, visit to, 310
- Palo Alto (California), football game at, 193, 194
- Panis Indians (see Pawnee Indians)
- Paris (France), ornaments from, 118
- Park House (Iowa City), theft in, 97
- Parker, Leonard F., statement of, 417, 418, 419; paper by, 419
- Parkersburg, description of, 253
- Parkman, Francis, style of, 175
- Parks, Isabella W., Kate Shelley aided by, 54
- Parks, W. H., payment made to, 327
- Parks's mill, 334
- Pasay (Philippine Islands), march to, 207
- Pawnee (Nebraska), land at, 348
- Pawnee Indians, trade with, 16; villages of, 169
- Peace pipe, smoking of, 315
- Peckham, Edward L., trip of, 233-249
- Pella, price of land at, 228; road to, 247
- Pennsylvania, Laura Treat from, 225; college in, 269; delegates from, 290; votes from, 291; presidential nominee from, 294; march into, 395
- Pennsylvania* (transport), assignment of troops to, 194; description of, 195, 196; departure of, 196, 198; trip on, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203
- Pennsylvania College (Gettysburg), telescope from, 60
- Pennsylvania University, telescope from, 60
- Peoria (Illinois), telegraph at, 378
- Perkins, George D., work of, 286
- Perrot, Nicholas, forts erected by, 14, 15
- Perry, Commodore, quotation from, 115
- Perry (Ohio), settlers in, 268
- Peru (Illinois), resident of, 374, 375; telegraph at, 378, 392
- Petersburg (Virginia), 394
- Peterson, mail from, 344



- Petrel* (gunboat), part of, in expedition, 202, 203
- Pettigrew, R. F., opinion of, 281, 282
- Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), astronomers from, 58, 59, 60; exposition at, 77, 89, 146; horticultural display at, 155; traveller from, 236
- Philadelphia Educational Museum, mention of, 157
- Philadelphia *Times*, comment in, 414
- Philippine Islands, mention of, 185; departure of troops for, 190, 193; view of, 200
- Philippines, To the*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 195-203
- Phinney, Frederick, part of, as bandmaster, 158
- Phoebus, reference to, 255
- Photography, description of early, 71, 72
- Pickering, E. C., interest of, in eclipse, 63, 64, 71
- Pierson, M. H., letter to, 339
- Pierson, Mrs. M. H., work of, 339, 340
- Pierson, Will, trip of, 340, 341
- Pike, Zebulon M., expedition of, 18
- Pike's Peak, migration to, 128, 130; mention of, 142, 260
- Pike's Peak, journeys of, 130, 131, 135
- Pilger, William, interest of, in eclipse, 65
- Pilot Grove, delegation from, 114
- Pilot Rock, mill at, 339
- Pioneering, comment on, 403, 404
- Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), telegraph at, 376
- Platt, Orville H., death of, 283
- Platt, Thomas C., work of, in convention, 265, 266, 290
- Platte River, trade on, 16; overflow of, 132
- Pleasant Prairie, telegraph at, 392
- Point aux Poules, 321
- Pole Raising, A Lincoln*, by O. A. GARRETSON, 109-116
- Poles, Lincoln, description of, 110, 111, 113; raising of, 111, 112, 114, 115
- Polk County, land in, 358; horse thieves in, 362
- Polo (Philippine Islands), 208
- Pomological Hall (World's Fair), description of, 155, 156
- Ponca Indians, villages of, 169
- Pontiac (Illinois), journey from, 337
- Pope, Alexander, belief of, 303
- Populists, resolutions of, 149; party of, 267
- Portia, mention of, 74
- Posse, summoning of, 406, 407
- Post-office, application for, 344
- Potomac River, crossing of, 394; valley of, 394, 395; incursions near, 395
- Pottawattamie Indians, part of, in expedition, 121, 122; representative of, 305; council with, 306; arrival of, 311; lands of, 320; warrior of, 321; mill held in trust for, 327; delegation of, 328; treaty signed by, 328; Prairie Band of, 329; relation of Wicks to, 331, 332
- Pottawattamie mill, location of, 319; cuts of, 324, 325; operation of, 329; miller of, 329, 330
- Pottawattamie Mill, The Old*, by CHARLES H. BABBITT, 319-334
- Poweshiek (Indian Chief), village of, 106
- Poweshiek County, towns in, 247, 248
- Prairie, burning of, 240; departure for, 310; description of, 348, 349
- Prairie Creek, pole secured from, 113
- Prairie du Chien (Wisconsin), trade at, 19; fort at, 20, 24; railroad to, 259; council at, 305, 318; town of, 306; preference for, 308; transportation of Indians to, 309; arrival at, 310; residents of, 313
- Prairie Grove (Arkansas), battle at, 112
- Presidential Hopes*, by ERIK MCKINLEY ERIKSSON, 284-294
- Presidio, camp on, 191
- Press Association, Iowa, mention of, 159, 160
- Primrose, delegation from, 114
- Providence (Rhode Island), trip from, 233; arrival at, 249
- Puebla* (ship), arrival of, 198, 201; meeting with, 199
- Pulilan (Philippine Islands), fight at, 212
- Punch*, contents of, 73
- Pythias, Knights of, band of, 287
- Quakers, hostility of, 395
- Quay, M. S., ballots for, 294
- Quebec (Canada), traders from, 30; furs sent to, 36, 37; French authority in, 117, 120; Governor of, 127
- Quick, Herbert, writings of, 75; comment by, 263
- Quimby's daughters, mention of, 75
- Quincy (Illinois), telegraph at, 376, 377
- Quingua (Philippine Islands), insurgents near, 211
- Quinquinto (Philippine Islands), 208



- Raccoon Forks, fort at, 19  
 Railroads, number of, in Iowa, 250, 251  
 Ralston, Mr., mention of, 423  
 Rawson, G. W., arrest of, 99; part of, in trial, 100  
 Reconstruction, problem of, 415  
 Red Cedar River, boundary at, 317  
 Red Cross, service of, 189  
 Red Head Chief, 308, 309, 310  
 Red Oak, resident of, 177; troops from, 180, 181, 185, 193; arrival of troops at, 187  
 Redwood, post of, 17, 19  
 Reed, Thomas B., ballots for, 294  
 Regimental Band, departure of, 186  
 Regulators, 362  
 Reid, J. M., story told by, 382  
 Religion, place of, 413, 415  
 Renards (see Fox Indians)  
 Republican Convention, National, delegate to, 272; Allison supporters at, 285; meeting of, 294  
 Republican Convention, State, meeting of, 292, 293  
 Republican party, nominee of, 265, 284, 285, 301; ideals of, 267; policy of, 276; caucuses of, 298, 299  
 Republicans, pole raisings by, 109-116; resolutions of, 149  
 Resolutions committee, report of, 285  
 Revere, Paul, character of, 75  
 Revolutionary War, soldiers of, 267  
 Rhode Island, trip from, 233, 243; support from, 289  
 Rice, Major, command of, 205  
 Rich, Jacob, work of, 286  
 Richmond (Virginia), mention of, 394; defense of, 396  
 Ridge Road, immigrants along, 264  
 Rigby, William T., work of, 401  
 Rio Grande de Pampanga, bridge across, 213  
 Roads, condition of, 347  
*Robert Campbell* (steamer), 135  
 ROBESON, GEO. F., *The Fur Trade*, 1-41  
 ROBESON, GEO. F., *Fur Trade in Early Iowa*, 14-29  
 ROBESON, GEO. F., *Life Among the Fur Traders*, 30-41  
 ROBESON, GEO. F., *Manuel Lisa*, 1-13  
 ROBESON, GEO. F., *Young Men for Old*, 295-302  
 Robinson, Mr., visit to, 231  
 Robinson, Levi, service of, as attorney, 100  
 Rochester (New York), resident of, 375  
 Rock Island, fort on, 105; Indian village near, 122; mention of, 307, 308; agent at, 309  
 Rock Island (Illinois), troops at, 25; trade at, 26; trip to, 226, 227; comparison of, 235; telegraph at, 389, 392  
 Rock Island *Adventurer*, comment in, 388  
 Rock Island Bridge, crossing of, 235  
 Rock Island Railroad, branch of, 347, 350  
 Rock River, village on, 122  
 Rockford (Illinois), description of, 255; C. H. Morrill in, 351; mention of, 357  
 Rodney, site of, 341  
 Rome, epics of, 43; mention of, 304  
 Ronalds, John, service of, as commissioner, 107, 108  
 Roosevelt, Theodore, 280, 281  
 Root, C. L., drill corps in command of, 161  
*Rope, At the End of Their*, by CHARLES H. BABBITT, 405-408  
 Roubideux, Mrs., description of, 164, 165  
 Roubideux, Antoine, story of, 164-173  
 Rowsburg (Ohio), trip from, 226  
*Royal Arch* (steamer), trip on, 231  
 Royal Hawaiian Band, fame of, 198  
 Russell, William, appointment of, as miller, 327; resignation of, 329  
 Russia, literature of, 73  
 Sacramento (California), Philip Clark in, 96  
 Safford, T. H., interest of, in eclipse, 67  
 Sagaunash, meaning of, 321 (see also Caldwell, Billy)  
 St. Anthony, Falls of, Indian agent from, 307  
 St. Charles, description of, 254, 259; lyceum at, 257; junction at, 259  
 St. Croix River, valley of, 311  
 St. Joseph (Missouri), 135  
 St. Lawrence River, plan for forts on, 14; French along, 117  
 St. Louis (Missouri), Manuel Lisa in, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, 13; expeditions from, 4, 5, 6, 7; mention of, 16, 308; trade at, 30, 36, 37, 40, 43, 310, 388; eclipse at, 59; excursionists at, 82; travellers at, 128; *Omaha* at, 131, 134, 135; convention at, 294; boat from, 308; Indian office at, 330; telegraph at, 374, 376, 377, 380, 389, 392  
 St. Louis Arsenal Band and Drum Corps, music by, 410  
 St. Louis Board of Trade, reception by, 82



- St. Paul, advice of, 304  
*St. Paul* (steamship), arrival of, 201  
 St. Paul Junction, eclipse at, 64  
 Salem, delegation from, 114  
 Saloons, presence of, 260, 261  
 Salt Lake City (Utah), 331  
*Samar* (gunboat), part of, in expedition, 203  
 Samuels, B. M., law firm of, 271  
 San Felipe (Philippine Islands), walls of, 219  
 San Fernando (Philippine Islands), 209, 213, 214, 215, 216  
 San Francisco (California), Mid-winter Exposition at, 159; troops at, 185, 192, 193, 221; commanding officer at, 185; trip to, 188; hospitality of, 189, 192, 193, 199; newspapers of, 191; departure from, 194, 195, 196; mail at, 221  
 San Francisco Bay, 191, 196, 220, 221  
 San Roque (Philippine Islands), mention of, 204; surrender of, 205; burning of, 205, 206; peninsula of, 206; souvenirs from, 206; troops from, 208  
 Sand Spring, railroad at, 251; trip from, 251  
 Santo Tomas (Philippine Islands), 214, 217  
 Sauk Indians, trade with, 15, 18, 39, 40, 41; treaty with, 105; village of, 120, 168, 169, 170, 172; trouble with, 120-127; language of, 165, 166; council with, 305, 306; agent of, 307; feud with, 307; trip of, 310, 311; war with, 313; chief of, 316; land of, 317, 319, 320  
 Sault Ste. Marie, Indians from, 307; delegation from, 310  
 Sausalito (California), location of, 191  
 Savanna (Illinois), ferry at, 352  
 Savannah (Georgia), telegraph at, 376  
 Savery Hotel (Des Moines), mention of, 298; decorations on, 409; banquet at, 410  
 Schofield, George, mill tract secured by, 332, 333  
 Schoolcraft, Henry, presence of, at council, 307; delegation of, 310; comment of, 312  
 Schools, interest in, 255, 256; defense of, 412, 413, 415; functions of, 415; support of, 416, 417  
 Scott, Mary A., presentation speech by, 93, 94  
 Scott, Mary S., work of, at exposition, 89  
 Scott County, trial in, 102; thieves' station in, 361; vigilantes in, 363  
 Second Battalion, companies of, 185; departure of, 185, 186; commander of, 206; relief sent to, 210; location of, 210, 211; work of, 213, 214, 215  
 Senate, United States, candidate for, 265, 277, 281; member of, 266, 272; steering committee of, 280; committees in, 283  
 Senator, United States, Allison as, 295, 299; campaign for, 296-302; law regarding, 302  
*Senator* (transport), sailing of, 218, 219, 220; cleanliness aboard, 219  
 Seneca, reference to, 304  
*Servant, A Diligent Public*, by VER-NOM COOPER, 265-283  
 Settlers, uprising of, 353  
 Seventh California, rifle team of, 193  
*Seventy Years, Autobiography of*, 284  
 Shafter, W. R., troops escorted by, 221  
 Shakespeare, William, characteristics of, 74  
 Sharpe, Joseph, mail carried by, 251  
 Shaw, Leslie M., speech by, 183; troops reviewed by, 221  
 Shaw's Gardens (St. Louis), tour to, 82  
 Shellady, Samuel, arrest of, 99; trial of, 100, 102, 103; pardon of, 103  
 Shelley, Kate, cut of, facing 45; heroism of, 46-55, 75; poem about, 53; home of, 52; fame of, 52-55  
*Shelley, Kate*, by J. A. SWISHER, 45-55  
 Shelley, M. J., mention of, 46  
 Shelley home, cut of, facing 52  
 "Shelter" (World's Fair), description of, 149, 150, 151, 152  
 Shenandoah, troops from, 180, 181, 185  
 Shenandoah, Army of the, regiments of, 397  
 Shenandoah River, valley of, 394, 395  
 Sheridan, Philip H., command of, 395, 396, 401; plans of, 398, 399  
 Sherman, Buren R., office of, 79  
 Sherman, James S., candidacy of, 281  
 Sherman, John, work of, 266; ballots for, 289, 291  
 Sherman, William T., arrival of, at Des Moines, 410; introduction by, 410; comment of, 422  
 Sherman Silver Act, 279  
 Shipp, George, diary of, 226; trip of, 226-232  
 Shunk, David, command of, 397



- Sibley, Hiram, telegraph company organized by, 393
- Sierra Mountains, trip through, 188, 189
- Silver bill, W. B. Allison's attitude toward, 278, 279
- Simpson, J., 248
- Simpson College, Kate Shelley at, 54; president of, 54
- Sindalan (Philippine Islands), 216
- Sioux City, eclipse station at, 64; river traffic of, 128-136; corn palaces at, 146, 148; mention of, 150; traveller from, 245; club of, 287; site of, 337; market at, 340; buffalo near, 341
- Sioux Indians, trade with, 15; alliance with, 119; villages of, 168, 169; mention of, 280; council with, 305, 306; feud with, 307; delegation of, 307; arrival of, 310; description of, 311; war with, 313; chief of, 316; lands of, 317, 319, 320; fear of, 321; request of, 344
- Sixth Army Corps, 396, 397
- Sixth Artillery, battery of, 201, 202
- SKINNER, ALANSON, *An Iowa Village*, 164-173
- Skunk River, trade along, 18, 19; mill on, 110; land along, 228; telegraph line near, 380
- "Sky, Land of the Unhidden", location of, 225
- Sloan, W. B., letter from, 390
- Smith, J. P., invitation of, 352; trip of, 355
- Smith, O. B., 342
- Smith, Patrick, land bought by, 95, 96
- Smithland, name of, 342
- Smock, Rev. D. V., home of, 349
- Smyth, William, service of, as attorney, 101
- Snouffer, J. J., work of, at exposition, 91
- Soldiers' Orphans' Home, eclipse station at, 64
- Sousa, John Philip, march of, 198
- South, rebellion in, 271, 272
- South America, display from, 90; markets of, 146
- South Carolina, Governor of, 245
- South Dakota, troops from, 210, 212
- South Hill Park (Burlington), observatory at, 61
- South West Fur Company, reorganization of, 24
- Spain, territory of, 15, 177, 178; war with, 178, 195, 270
- Spain, Infanta of, 158
- Spanish, interest of, in America, 14, 15; trading of, 30-41
- Spanish-American War, soldiers of, 224
- Spanish Commercial Company, trade of, 16
- Spanish Cortes, reply of, 178
- Spirit Lake, Indian atrocities at, 245, 264; immigrants to, 264
- Springfield (Illinois), report of eclipse at, 68; telegraph at, 378
- Stafford, William, service of, as miller, 329
- Stage, travel by, 236-244
- Stagecoach, travel by, 250-261
- Standish, Miles, character of, 75
- Starr, H. W., land owned by, 61
- State colleges, opposition to, 418
- State Fair Grounds, troops at, 181, 182, 185, 186
- State University of Iowa, coeducation at, 257; Parker at, 417; interest in, 418
- Steamboats, description of, 128-136
- Stephenson's Depot, troops at, 396
- Stevens, Thaddeus, work of, 276
- Stone, John W., work of, 286
- Stotsenberg, John M., death of, 211
- Stratford, location of, 352
- Stuart, reception of troops at, 187
- Studor, Joseph, return of, 96
- Subig Bay, passing of, 200
- Sugar Grove, 248
- Sulpicians, missionary work of, 119
- Sun, eclipse of, 56-72
- Superior (Wisconsin), Indians from, 311
- Supreme Court (Iowa), appeal to, 103
- Supreme Court (United States), decisions of, 352, 353
- Susquehanna River, mention of, 255
- Sutro Baths (San Francisco), 193
- Swalm, Al, service of, 195, 196
- Swan, Chauncey, service of, as commissioner, 107, 108
- Sweetland Center, telegraph at, 392
- SWISHER, J. A., *Grant's Des Moines Speech*, 409-421
- SWISHER, J. A., *Kate Shelley*, 45-55
- Symbolism, comment on, 335, 336
- Taft, William Howard, candidacy of, 267
- Taliaferro, Lawrence, attendance of, at council, 307, 310
- Tama, 307
- Taney Street (Davenport), name of, 392
- Tariff, W. B. Allison's interest in, 277, 278
- Taylor, James, charge against, 99, 100
- Taylor, Zachary, election of, 386



- Tecumseh (Indian Chief), secretary of, 321  
 Telegraph, history of, 373-393  
 Telegraph Directory, 391  
 Telegraph instruments, types of, 383-385  
 Telegraph lines, routes of, 375, 376, 377, 378, 393; construction of, 378-382; insulation of, 382, 383; inefficiency of, 385, 386  
 Telegraph messages, number transmitted, 389; rates on, 389, 391, 392  
 Telegraph operators, early, 387, 388  
*Telegraph Pioneering*, by BEN HUR WILSON, 373-393  
 Telegraph Road, location of, 392  
 Telescope, use of, 60  
*Temerario* (ship), 196  
 Temperance, Sons of, 261  
 Templin, J. D., law office of, 96; part of, as attorney, 100, 101  
 Tennessee, troops from, 192, 198; rifle team from, 193; settlers from, 262; support from, 289; resident of, 382  
 Tennessee, Army of the, Society of, reunion of, 409-413; president of, 410; address before, 414; proceedings of, 418; secretary of, 420  
 Tesson, Louis, grant to, 16; post of, 19  
 Thacher, George, position of, 418  
 Thanksgiving Day, celebration of, 199  
 Thieves, names of, 361; trial of, 366, 367, 368  
 Third Battalion, companies of, 186; departure of, 186; work of, 205, 206, 210; location of, 210, 211; bridge guarded by, 213; camp of, 214  
 Third Congressional District of Iowa, representative from, 273, 274  
 Third General Assembly, work of, 390  
 Third Iowa Infantry, troops of, 180, 181; companies of, 184; colonel of, 195, 196  
 Thirteenth Amendment, 273  
 Thompson, Garrett, trick of, 361; case of, 367, 368  
 Thomas, J. W., death of, 362  
 Three Rivers (Canada), French in, 117  
 Thrift, W. H., work of, 287  
 Tipperary (Ireland), immigrant from, 46  
 Tipton, population of, 253; newspapers in, 258  
 Todd, Andrew, trade of, 15, 16  
 Tokio (Japan), visit to, 219  
 Toledo (Ohio), telegraph at, 376  
 Tolstoi, Count, writings of, 74  
 Torbert, William H., letter to, 300  
 "Town, A Hot Time in the Old", playing of, 193  
 Townsend, T. W., manuscript photographed by, 420  
 Traders, life of, 30-41; coming of, to America, 117, 118  
 Traders Point, 321  
 Trading companies, trade of, 34, 35  
 Trading posts, description of, 15, 18, 19, 30, 32, 36, 38; establishing of, 118  
 Transportation, kinds of, 225-232  
 Trapping, 342  
 Travel, mode of, 233-261  
 Treasury, United States, embarrassment of, 278  
 Treat, Laura Cooper, beliefs of, 225, 226  
 Tremont Hall, location of, 388  
 Trials, conducting of, 366, 367, 368  
 Trusdell House (Iowa City), 232  
 Tukala Society, warriors of, 172  
 Turkey River, trade along, 18, 19  
 Twenty-first Illinois Infantry, commander of, 423  
 Twenty-second Iowa Infantry, commander of, 397  
 Twenty-third General Assembly, act of, 146, 147  
 Twenty-third United States Infantry, rifle team of, 193  
 Twenty-fourth General Assembly, appropriation of, 148, 149  
 Twenty-fourth Iowa Infantry, commander of, 397; casualties of, 397; officer of, 401  
 Twenty-eighth Iowa Infantry, commander of, 397  
 Twin Lakes, slough near, 338  
*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, influence of, 74  
*Under Fire*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 204-217  
 Union, loyalty to, 411  
 Union army, disasters to, 395; divisions of, 396, 397; victory of, 402  
 Union Pacific Railroad, land purchased from, 358  
 Union party, mention of, 272, 273  
 United States, Indian relations of, 18, 21, 25, 26; land ceded to, 105, 319; public opinion in, regarding Cuba, 177; war declared by, 178; departure from, 192; danger of insurrection against, 203; rumor in, 219; aspirants to presidency of, 266, 271, 284; free coinage in, 278, 279; mill held by, 327, 333; public land surveys of, 331; telegraph in, 375



- United States, President of, mention of, 77; authority of, 178; arrival of, at Des Moines, 410
- United States Board of Lady Managers, reception held for, 160
- United States Commissioners, part of, at exposition, 93; presence of, at council, 307, 308
- United States Land Offices, money paid to, 353
- United States Naval Academy, graduate of, 177
- United States Naval Observatory, member of, 59
- United States Veteran Volunteers, enlistments in, 215
- Upper Iowa University, enrollment of, 256
- Upper Ioway River, boundary at, 317
- Ursa Major, reference to, 251
- Utah battery, guns of, 212
- Vail, Henry, interest of, in eclipse, 59
- Valley of Virginia, name of, 394
- Van Ness Avenue (San Francisco), 195, 221
- Van Vechten, Carl, works of, 73
- Vassar College, class from, 62, 63
- Venison, preparation of, 342
- Vicksburg (Mississippi), mention of, 273; fall of, 394; siege of, 397; medal presented at, 423
- Vigilance committees, origin of, 359; names of, 362; organization of, 364, 365; work of, 365; decline of, 369, 370
- Vigilance Committees, The*, by ORVILLE F. GRAHAME, 359-370
- Vigilantes, prerequisites for, 363; work of, 365-369
- Village, An Ioway*, by ALANSON SKINNER, 164-173
- Villard, Oswald, works of, 73
- Villiers, Nicolas Coulon de, murder of, 120
- Villisca, troops from, 180, 181, 186
- Vinton, part of, in World's Fair, 153; trip to, 229, 250, 251; population of, 253; newspapers in, 258
- Vinton *Eagle*, speech published in, 417, 418
- Virginia, settlers from, 262
- Virginia, Garden of, devastation of, 396
- Voyage of the Omaha, A*, by EDGAR A. HOLT, 128-136
- Voyageurs, life of, 31, 32
- Wabash River, post on, 122
- Wabasha (Indian Chief), speech of, 316
- Wabaunsee (Indian Chief), ability of, 321; village of, 322; objections of, 327
- Wabaunsee Creek, village on, 322
- Wade-Davis plan, 273
- Wages, amount of, 351
- Wampum (Indian Chief), 305
- Wanita (Indian Chief), robe of, 311
- Waples House, message sent to, 374, 375
- Wapsie Rangers, 362
- Wapsipinicon River, trade on, 26; Indians along, 121, 123
- War, causes of, 223; lure of, 223, 224
- War, Secretary of, part of, in Indian affairs, 25, 26; assurance to, 309; mention of, 410
- Ward, Ferdinand, 423
- Warsaw (Illinois), telegraph at, 376, 377, 380
- Washington, George, fame of, 410
- Washington, regiment from, 221
- Washington (Iowa), description of, 227, 228; railroad at, 347; trip to, 349; home in, 350
- Washington (D. C.), mention of, 105, 388, 394, 395; news from, 183; message from, 192; Nelson W. Aldrich in, 266; W. B. Allison in, 284, 285; James Harlan at, 296; church in, 297; A. B. Cummins in, 302; records at, 320; telegraph at, 375, 376; troops ordered to, 395
- Washington County, stagecoaches in, 263
- Washta, origin of name of, 344
- Wasson, Jesse, town founded by, 255
- Waterloo, trip to, 250; schools in, 256; harmonic society of, 258
- Watertown (New York), S. E. Wicks born at, 329
- Watson, James C., interest of, in eclipse, 59
- Waukon, description of, 254
- Waverly, trip to, 250; description of, 259
- Ways and Means, Committee on, member of, 274, 275; chairman of, 276
- Weapons, kinds of, 209, 210, 214
- Weather, description of, 231
- Webster City, coming of Laura Treat to, 225; description of, 228, 229, 259; George Shipp in, 232; trip to, 352; mention of, 356
- Weekly State Reporter, The* (Iowa City), account of trials in, 100; comment in, 103
- West, A Journey Out*, by EDWARD L. PECKHAM, 233-249
- West Point, cadets from, 160, 161



- West Union, description of, 230, 253, 254; trip to, 231, 250; population of, 253; schools in, 255; literary association at, 257; band of, 258
- West Virginia, Army of, commander of, 396
- Western Engineer*, mention of, 129
- Western Reserve College, student of, 269
- Western Stage Company, route of, 251; transportation over, 252
- Western Union Telegraph Company, organization of, 393
- Westfield, road to, 247; description of, 247, 248, 249
- Wheat, price of, 337
- Wheaton, Lloyd, command of, 213, 215; praise of, 216
- Whig party, member of, 270, 271
- Whisman, A. J., home of, 339, 344, 345; trip of, 340, 341; store of, 344
- Whisman, A. J., Pioneer*, by INEZ KECK, 337-345
- White Cloud (Indian), meeting with, 309; speech of, 316, 317
- White Cloud (Missouri), 135
- White Cow (Indian), *Omaha* visited by, 133
- Whiting, J. H., home of, 63
- Wicks, Stutely E., mill of, 319, 332, 333; cut of, facing 328; sketch of life of, 329, 330; demurrer of, 330, 331; relation of, with Indians, 331, 332; death of, 333
- Wicks's Mill, 333
- Wills-St. Claire Motor Company, trade mark of, 335
- Wide Awakers, delegation of, 114
- Wilcox, J. Jewett, service of, as clerk, 130, 135
- Wilkinson, Boyd, crimes of, 96, 97; capture of, 98; death of, 98, 99
- Wilkinson, Mrs. Boyd, mention of, 98
- Wilkinson Case, The Boyd*, by ERIK MCKINLEY ERIKSSON, 95-104
- Willard, Frances E., 54
- Wilmot Proviso, mention of, 270
- Wilson, Ben Hur, map drawn by, 377
- WILSON, BEN HUR, *The Eclipse of 1869*, 56-72
- WILSON, BEN HUR, *Telegraph Pioneering*, 373-393
- Wilson, James F., work of, 286; votes for, 298
- Wilson, Woodrow, remark of, 176
- Winchester (Virginia), troops near, 396, 397; army at, 398; battle at, 399-402
- Winchester, In the Battle of*, by JOHN ELY BRIGGS, 394-402
- Winchester Pike, troops on, 402
- Wind, The (Indian Chief), speech of, 316
- Wineland, Andrew, service of, as captain, 130-136
- Winnebago Indians, trade with, 25; mention of, 166; part of, in pageant, 305; council with, 306; delegation of, 307; arrival of, 311
- Winsor, Justin, style of, 174
- Wisconsin, trading posts in, 15; prize won by, 89; Governor of, 105; territory of, 150; delegates from, 290; votes from, 291; Indians from, 307; horse thieves in, 360
- Wisconsin prairie, heights overlooking, 306
- Wisconsin River, forts near, 14; trade on, 19; Fox Indians along, 119
- Woman's Relief Corps, escort of, 180
- Women's Building (World's Fair), 161, 162
- Wood, Ed, accident of, 47, 48; rescue of, 51, 52
- Woodbury County, products of, 135
- Woodruff, Fred P., refusal of, 215
- Woodworth, W. C., pole raising sponsored by, 110
- Wool, selling of, 227
- Wooster Academy, student of, 269, 270
- World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago), holding of, 146-163
- World's Fair, band of, 198
- World's Fair, Iowa at the*, by BRUCE E. MAHAN, 146-163
- World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, holding of, 77-94, 146
- Wormood, W. W., interest of, in eclipse, 64
- W'Ossin, Shinguaba, speech of, 315, 316
- Wyoming, name of, 255; interest of, in education, 256
- Wyoming County (New York), 255
- Yankee Run, location of, 366
- Yankees, trade of, 30-41
- Yankton Indians, chief of, 311
- Yellowstone Expedition, 11
- Yellowstone River, fort near, 43
- Yokohama (Japan), trip to, 219
- Young, Brigham, opinion of, 243
- Young, C. A., interest of, in eclipse, 71
- Young, Granville, 361
- Young, Lafayette, part of, at World's Fair, 160
- Zid, Monga, speech of, 315



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## CONTENTS

### NUMBER 1 — JANUARY 1925

#### THE FUR TRADE

Manuel Lisa	GEO. F. ROBESON	1
Fur Trade in Early Iowa	GEO. F. ROBESON	14
Life Among the Fur Traders	GEO. F. ROBESON	30
Comment by the Editor		42

### NUMBER 2 — FEBRUARY 1925

Kate Shelley	J. A. SWISHER	45
The Eclipse of 1869	BEN HUR WILSON	56
Comment by the Editor		73

### NUMBER 3 — MARCH 1925

Iowa at the New Orleans Fair	BRUCE E. MAHAN	77
The Boyd Wilkinson Case		
	ERIK MCKINLEY ERIKSSON	95
Comment by the Editor		105



## NUMBER 4 — APRIL 1925

A Lincoln Pole Raising	O. A. GARRETSON	109
When Iowa Was Young	JOHN ELY BRIGGS	117
A Voyage of the Omaha	EDGAR A. HOLT	128
Comment by the Editor		137

## NUMBER 5 — MAY 1925

In Honor of the Flag	J. D. EDMUNDSON	141
Iowa at the World's Fair	BRUCE E. MAHAN	146
An Ioway Village	ALANSON SKINNER	164
Comment by the Editor		174

## NUMBER 6 — JUNE 1925

## THE FIFTY-FIRST IOWA

The Call to Arms	BRUCE E. MAHAN	177
At Camp McKinley	BRUCE E. MAHAN	182
By the Golden Gate	BRUCE E. MAHAN	187



# CONTENTS

v

To the Philippines	BRUCE E. MAHAN	195
Under Fire	BRUCE E. MAHAN	204
Home Again	BRUCE E. MAHAN	218
Comment by the Editor		223

## NUMBER 7 — JULY 1925

Prospecting for a New Home	BESSIE L. LYON	225
A Journey Out West	EDWARD L. PECKHAM	233
Gleanings of an Editor	FRANK A. MULLIN	250
Comment by the Editor		262

## NUMBER 8 — AUGUST 1925

WILLIAM B. ALLISON

A Diligent Public Servant	VERNOM COOPER	265
Presidential Hopes	ERIK MCKINLEY ERIKSSON	284
Young Men for Old	GEO. F. ROBESON	295
Comment by the Editor		303



## NUMBER 9 — SEPTEMBER 1925

The Great Council of 1825	BRUCE E. MAHAN	305
The Old Pottawattamie Mill	CHARLES H. BABBITT	319
Comment by the Editor		335

## NUMBER 10 — OCTOBER 1925

A. J. Whisman, Pioneer	INEZ KECK	337
Buying a Farm in 1866	CHARLES D. KIRKPATRICK	346
The Trials of a Homesteader	CHARLES H. MORRILL	351
The Vigilance Committees	ORVILLE F. GRAHAME	359
Comment by the Editor		371

## NUMBER 11 — NOVEMBER 1925

Telegraph Pioneering	BEN HUR WILSON	373
In the Battle of Winchester	JOHN ELY BRIGGS	394
Comment by the Editor		403



## CONTENTS

vii

### NUMBER 12 — DECEMBER 1925

At the End of Their Rope	CHARLES H. BABBITT	405
Grant's Des Moines Speech	J. A. SWISHER	409
Comment by the Editor		422
Index		425

### ILLUSTRATIONS

Manuel Lisa	<i>facing</i>	1
The Fur Trade Country (map)		22
Kate Shelley	<i>facing</i>	45
The Des Moines River Bridge	<i>facing</i>	48
The Home of Kate Shelley	<i>facing</i>	52
The Burlington Observatory	<i>facing</i>	68
The Eclipse of 1869	<i>facing</i>	72
Facsimile of Joe Fallon's Oath		145
The Iowa Building at the World's Fair	<i>facing</i>	154
The Pavilion in the Iowa Building	<i>facing</i>	162



Colonel John C. Loper	<i>facing</i> 188
Officers of the Fifty-first Iowa	<i>facing</i> 212
William Boyd Allison	<i>facing</i> 265
The Great Council of 1825	<i>facing</i> 312
The Old Pottawattamie Mill (northeast view)	324
The Old Pottawattamie Mill (southwest view)	325
Stutely E. Wicks	<i>facing</i> 328
O'Reilly Telegraph Lines (map)	377
Simple Morse Recording Apparatus	383
Automatic Morse Register	384
Morse Signal Key	384



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